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MOURNFUL MONSTER

by DAN MALCOLM

NOVELETTE *illustrated by* EMSH

It was huge, massive, with a hide of scales, legs like tree trunks and a fanged mouth of utter horror. Yet it was unmistakably intelligent — and filled with sadness

IT was almost time for the regular midweek flight to leave. On the airstrip, the technicians were g i v i n g the two-engine jet a last-minute checkdown. In fifteen minutes, according to the chalked announcement on the bulletin board, the flight would depart—making the two thousand mile voyage across the trackless, unexplored wilderness that lay between the two Terran colonies of Marleyville and New Lisbon, on the recently-s e t t l e d planet of Loki in the Procyon system.

In the Marleyville airport building, David Marshall was having one last drink for the road, and trying unsuccessfully to catch the attention of the strikingly beautiful girl in the violet synthofab dress. Marshall, an anthropologist specializing in non-human cultures, was on his way to New Lisbon to interview a few wrinkled old hunters who claimed to have valuable information for him. He was trying to prove that an intelligent non-human race still existed somewhere on Loki, and he had been told at Marleyville that several veteran hunters in New Lisbon had insisted they knew where the hidden race lived.

"Now b o a r d i n g for the flight to New Lisbon," came the tinny announcement from



the loudspeaker. *"Passengers for New Lisbon please report to the plane on the field."*

Marshall gulped the remainder of his drink, picked up his small portfolio, and headed through the swinging door to the airfield. Stepping out of the aircooled building into the noonday heat was like walking into a steambath. The climate on Loki ranged from subtropical to utterly unbearable. Humans had been able to settle in coastal areas only, in the temperate zone. There was one Earth colony here, Marleyville, forty years old and with a population of about eighteen thousand.

Far across the continent, on the western coast, was the other major colony, New Lisbon, with some twenty thousand people. Half a dozen other smaller colonies were scattered up and down each coast, but few humans had ventured into the torrid interior of the continent. It was one vast unexplored jungle.

And as for the other continents of the planet, they were totally unsuited for human life. Temperatures in the equatorial regions of Loki ranged as high as 180 degrees. In the cooler areas of high and low altitudes, a more tolerable range of 70-100 prevailed. The polar regions were more comfortable so far as climate went, but they were barren and worthless as places to farm or mine.

"Last call for New Lisbon plane," the announcer called. Marshall trotted up the ramp, smiled at the stewardess, and took a seat. The plane was an old and rickety one. It had seen many years' service, Marshall thought. Loki Airlines had a "fleet" of just one plane, purchased at great expense from the highly industrialized neighbor world of Thor. There was not much traffic between Marleyville and New Lisbon. Once a week, the old jet plane made a round trip across the jungle for the benefit of those people—never more than a dozen or so each time—who had some reason for travelling to another colony.

The plane seated about forty, but no more than fifteen were aboard. The attractive girl in the violet dress was sitting a few rows ahead of Marshall. With so many empty seats in the plane, he did not

have any valid excuse for sitting down next to her. Which was unfortunate, he thought with mild regret.

He glanced around. People sat scatteredly here and there in the plane. The stewardess came by and pleasantly told him to fasten his seat belt. A few moments later, the twin jet engines rumbled into life. The plane rolled slowly out onto the runway. Within instants, it was aloft, streaking eastward on the five-hour journey to distant New Lisbon.

THE accident happened in the third hour of the flight. Marshall had been dividing his time between staring out the window at the bright green blur that was the ground eighteen thousand feet below, and reading. He had brought an anthropological journal with him to read, but he found it difficult to concentrate. He would much rather have preferred to be talking to the girl in the violet dress.

He was wondering whether he would have any luck in New Lisbon. This was the final year of his research grant; in a few months his money would run out, and he would have to return to Earth and take a job teaching at some university. He hoped there would be some clue waiting at the other colony.

The only way an anthropologist could win prestige and acclaim these days was by doing an intensive report on some unknown alien race. The trouble was, most of the planets of the galaxy had been pretty well covered by now. He had his choice of venturing onto some distant and dangerous world or repeating someone else's work.

But there was a rumor that somewhere on Loki lived the remnants of an almost-extinct alien race. Marshall had pegged his hopes on finding that race. He had arrived in Marleyville a week ago and had spoken to some of the old settlers. Yes, they knew the rumors, they told him; no, they couldn't offer any concrete information. But there were some early settlers in New Lisbon who might be able to help. So Marshall was on his way to New Lisbon. And if he drew a blank there, it was back to Earth.

His thoughts were running in that depressing channel, and he decided to try to get some sleep instead of doing still more brooding and worrying. He nudged the seat-stud, guiding the seat back into a more comfortable position, and closed his eyes.

An instant later a shriek sounded in the ship.

Marshall snapped to attention. He glanced across the cabin and saw what the cause of the shriek had been. Great reddish gouts of flame were streaking from the engine on the opposite wing. Moments later the ship yawed violently to one side. Over the public address system came the pilot's voice: "Please fasten seat belts. Remain seated."

An excited buzz of conversation rippled through the ship. Marshall felt strangely calm and detached. So this was what it was like to become involved in an aircraft accident!

His ears stung suddenly as the ship lost altitude. It was dropping in a long, slow glide toward the ground. Shock-waves ran through the passenger cabin as the smoking jet engine exploded. Above everything came the tight, tense voice of the pilot: "We are making an emergency landing. Remain calm. Do not leave your seats until the instruction is given."

The ship was swooping toward the jungle in an erratic wobbling glide now. Cries of panic were audible. With one engine completely gone, the pilot was having obvious difficulty controlling the ship. It came stuttering down through the atmosphere. Marshall could make out individual features of the landscape now. He saw jungle, wild, fierce-looking, untamed.

"Prepare for landing!" came the pilot's words. Marshall gripped his chair's arms tightly. A second later the ship thundered to the ground, accompanied by the crashing sound of falling trees. Marshall glanced out the window. They had crash-landed in the thick of the jungle, pancaking down on top of the trees and flattening them.

He ripped off his safety belt. No time to stop to think—he had to get out of the plane. He fumbled for his portfolio, picked it up, saw

something else under the seat. in big red letters it said SURVIVAL KIT. Marshall grabbed it.

Passengers were rising from their seats. Some were stunned, unconscious, perhaps dead from the violent impact of landing. Marshall stepped out into the aisle. Words met his eyes—EMERGENCY EXIT. His hands closed on a metal handle. He thrust downward, out.

The door opened. He tumbled out, dropping eight or nine feet to the soft, spongy forest floor. He knew he had to run, run fast.

He ran—helter-skelter, tripping and stumbling over the hidden vines. Sweat poured down his body. Time seemed to stand still. He wondered how many other passengers would escape in time from the doomed ship.

The explosion, when it came, seemed to fill the universe. A colossal boom unfolded behind him. The jungle heat rose to searing intensity for a moment. Marshall fell flat, shielding his head against metal fragments with his arms. He lay sprawled face-down in the thick vegetation, panting breathlessly, while fury raged a few hundred yards behind him. He did not look. He uttered a prayer of thankfulness for his lucky escape.

And then he realized he had very little to be thankful for. He was alive, true. But he was alive in the middle of a trackless jungle, with civilization a thousand miles away at the nearest. Desperately he hoped that there had been other survivors.

HE waited for a few minutes after the blast had subsided. Then he rose unsteadily. The ship was a charred ruin. a blistered hulk. Fragments of the fuselage lay scattered over a wide area. One had landed only a few dozen feet from where he lay.

He started to walk toward the wreckage.

Figures lay huddled in the grass. Marshall reached the first. He was a man in his fifties, heavy-set and balding, who was clambering to his feet. Marshall helped him up. The older man's face was pale and sweat-beaded, and his lips

were quivering. For a moment neither said anything.

Then Marshall said, in a voice that was surprisingly steady, "Come. We'd better look for other survivors."

The second to be found was the girl in the violet dress. She was sitting upright, fighting to control her tears. Marshall felt a sudden surge of joy when he saw that she was still alive. She had not completely escaped the fury of the blast. though; her dress was scorched, her eyebrows singed, the ends of her hair crisped. She seemed otherwise unharmed.

Not far from her lay two more people—a couple, who got shakily to their feet as Marshall approached them. Like the others they were pale and close to the borderline of hysteria.

Five survivors. That was all. Marshall found six charred bodies near the plane—passengers who had succeeded in escaping from the ship, but who had been only a few feet away at the time of the blast. None of the bodies was recognizable. He turned away, slowly, shoulders slumping. Five survivors out of twenty. And they were lost in the heart of the jungle.

"We're all that's left," he said in a quiet voice.

The girl in the violet dress—her beauty oddly enhanced by the tattered appearance of her clothing and the smudges of soot on her face—murmured, "It's horrible! Going along so well—and in just a couple of moments—"

"It was an old plane," muttered the older man bitterly. "An antique. It was criminal to let such a plane be used commercially."

"Talking like that isn't going to help us now," said the remaining man, who stood close to his wife.

"Nothing's going to help us now," said the girl in the violet dress. "We're in the middle of nowhere without any way of getting help. It would have been better to be blown up than to survive like this—"

"No," Marshall said. He held up the small square box labelled SURVIVAL KIT. "Did any of you bring your survival kits out of the plane? No? Well, luckily, I grabbed up mine before I escaped.

Maybe there's something in here to help us."

They crowded close around as he opened the kit. He called off the contents. "Water purifier....compass....a flare-gun and a couple of flares.... a blaster with auxiliary charges....a handbook of survival techniques. That's about it. There's a knife, a flamegun, and a couple of other things."

"We'll never make it," the girl in the violet dress said softly. "A thousand miles back to Marleyville, a thousand miles ahead to New Lisbon. And no roads, no maps. We might as well use that blaster on ourselves."

"No!" Marshall snapped. Staring at the stunned, defeated faces of the other four, he realized that he would have to assume the leadership of the little group. "We're *not* giving up," he said sharply. "We can't let ourselves give up. We're going ahead—ahead to New Lisbon!"

THE first thing to do, Marshall thought, was to get organized. He led them a few hundred yards through the low underbrush, to the side of a small stream. Strange forest birds, angry over the sudden noisy invasion of their domain, cackled shrilly in the heavy-leaved trees above them. Marshall took a seat on a blunt boulder at the edge of the stream and said, "Now, then. We're going to make a trek through this jungle and we're going to reach New Lisbon alive. All clear?"

No one answered.

Marshall said, "Good. That means we all have to work together, if we're going to survive. I hope you understand the meaning of cooperation. No bickering, no selfishness, no defeatism. Let's get acquainted, first. My name is David Marshall. I'm from Earth. I'm a graduate student of anthropology—came to Loki to do anthropological research toward my doctorate in alien cultures."

He glanced inquisitively at the girl in the violet dress. She said in a faltering voice, "My name is Lois Chalmers. I'm—I'm the daughter of the governor of the New Lisbon colony."

Marshall's eyes widened slightly. Governor Alfred Chalmers was one of the most im-

portant men in the entire Procyon system. Her presence here meant that there would surely be an attempt to find the survivors of the crash.

Marshall next looked toward the married couple. The man, who was short, thickset, and muscular, said, "I'm Clyde Garvey. This is my wife Estelle. We're second-generation colonists at Marleyville. We were going to take a vacation in New Lisbon."

The remaining member of the little band was the middle-aged man. He spoke now. "My name is Kyle, Nathan Kyle. I'm from Earth. I have large business investments on Loki, both at Marleyville and New Lisbon."

"All right," Marshall said. "We all know who everybody else is, now." He looked up at the sky. It was mid-afternoon, and only the overhanging roof of leaves shielded the forest floor from the blazing sun. "We were just about at the halfway point of the trip when we crashed. That means it's just as far to Marleyville as it is to New Lisbon. Probably we're slightly closer to New Lisbon. We might as well head in that direction."

"Maybe it's better to stay right where we are," Nathan Kyle suggested. "They're certain to search for survivors. If we stay near the wreckage—"

"They could search this jungle for a hundred years and never cover the whole territory," Marshall said. "Don't forget that the only transcontinental plane on this world just crashed. All they have is a handful of short-range copters and light planes—not sufficient to venture this deep into the jungle. No; our only hope is to head for New Lisbon. Maybe when we get close enough, we'll be spotted by a search-party."

"What will we eat?" Estelle Garvey wanted to know.

"We'll hunt the native wildlife," Marshall told her. "And supplement that with edible vegetation. Don't worry about the food angle."

"How long will it take to reach New Lisbon?" Kyle asked.

Marshall shrugged. "We'll march by day, camp by night. If we can average ten miles a day through the jungle, it'll

take about three months to reach safety."

"Three months—"

"I'm afraid so. But at least we'll get there alive."

"Nice to know *you're* so confident, Marshall," Kyle said bleakly. "Three months on foot through a jungle thick with all sorts of dangers—"

"Don't give up before we've started," Marshall said. He studied the survival kit compass for a moment, frowning. "We want to head due east. That way. If we start right away, we can probably cover five or six miles before nightfall. But let's eat and freshen up first."

The blaster supplied in the survival kit had one hundred shots in it, plus an extra hundred in the refill. Marshall was a fair shot, but he knew he would have to do better than fair if they were to survive the trip. Every shot would have to count.

He and Garvey struck out into the forest while Kyle and the women remained behind to fashion water-canteens out of some gourds that grew near the water's edge. The two men entered the darkest part of the jungle, where the treetops were linked a hundred feet above the forest floor by a thick meshwork of entangled vines that all but prevented sunlight from penetrating.

They moved slowly, trying to avoid making noise. Garvey heard a threshing in the underbrush and touched Marshall's arm. They froze; a second later a strange creature emerged from a thicket a few feet away from them. It was vaguely deerlike, a lithe, graceful beast whose hide was a delicate grayish-purple in color. In place of horns, three fleshy tendrils sprouted from its forehead.

The animal studied the two men with grave curiosity. Evidently it had never seen human beings before, and did not know whether or not to be afraid. Slowly the forehead-tendrils rose in the air, until they stood erect like three pencils on the beast's head.

Marshall lifted the blaster. Alarmed at the sudden motion, the animal gathered its legs and prepared to bound off into the darkness. Marshall fired quickly. A bolt of energy spurted from the blaster; he aimed for the chest, but his

aim was high, and he caught the beast in the throat instead. The animal blinked once in surprise, then slipped to the mossy carpet of the forest.

Marshall and Garvey carried their prey back to the stream slung between them. The women had worked efficently while they were gone, Marshall saw. Five gourds lay ranged neatly along the stream's bank, each one carefully hollowed out. Kyle was busy with the water purifier.

Marshall and Garvey dumped the deer-like creature in the middle of the clearing. "Our first meal," Marshall said. "I hope there aren't any vegetarians among us."

IT was a messy business, skinning the animal and preparing it for cooking. Marshall drew that job, and performed it with the small knife from the survival kit. Garvey and his wife built the fire, while Kyle cut down a green branch to use as a spit.

The cooking job was extremely amateur, and the meat, when they finally served it, was half raw and half scorched. None of them seemed to have much of an appetite, but they forced themselves to eat, and washed it down with purified water. After the meal, Marshall carefully wrapped up the remainder of the meat in the animal's own hide, tying the bundle together with vines. They filled their gourd canteens and plugged them shut.

No one said much. A tremendous task faced them—a trek across half a continent, through unknown jungle. All five seemed subdued by the enormity of the job that confronted them.

They started out, hacking their way through the intertwined brambles, following the compass on an easterly course. The stream followed right along with them, which made things a little easier. It was always good to know that your water supply was heading in the same general direction you were going.

Loki's day was twenty-eight hours long. Marshall's wristwatch was an Earthtype standard one, so it was of little use to him, but Garvey wore a watch which gave the time as

half past three in the afternoon Loki time—Marleyville time. But they were a thousand miles east of Marleyville, and heading further east with every step. Marshall did not attempt to adjust the time to the longitude. Life was complicated enough as it was, just then.

If Garvey's watch were right, though, they had about six more hours of marching time before nightfall would arrive. If they could average a mile an hour while walking, Marshall thought, it might be possible to reach New Lisbon in eighty or ninety days. If they lived that long, he added grimly.

The stream widened out after a while, becoming a fairly broad little river. Water beasts were slumbering near the bank. Marshall approached to look at them. They were reptiles, sleek velvet-brown creatures twenty feet long, with tails that switched ominously from side to side and toothy mouths that yawned hungrily at the little party of Terrans. But the animals made no attempt to come up on shore and attack. They simply glared, beady-eyed, at the Earthmen.

After more than an hour of steady marching Lois Chalmers asked for a few minutes to rest, and they halted. She pulled off the stylish pumps she was wearing, and stared ruefully at her swollen feet.

"These shoes of mine just aren't intended for jungle treks," she said mournfully. "But I can't walk barefoot in the jungle, I suppose."

Garvey said, "If you'd like, I'll make you some sandals out of bark and vines."

The girl brightened. "Oh, would you?"

So there was a fifteen-minute halt while Garvey fashioned crude sandals for her. During the wait, Marshall ventured down to the river-bank again. The big sleeping reptiles lay sunning themselves on the mud by the side of the water.

Marshall saw golden shapes gliding through the water. Fish. Another source of food, he thought, and one that would not consume the precious blaster-charges. They would need to make hooks from slivers of bone and fishing-line from the sinews of animals.

He smiled to himself as the idea occurred. David Marshall, late of the University of Chicago, had no business knowing anything about such primitive things as home-made fishing equipment.

But a man had to survive, he thought. And to survive you had to use your brains.

He peered at the slowly-moving fish below the water, and nodded to himself. The first opportunity they had, they would improvise some fishing equipment.

THE river narrowed to a stream again, later on, and veered sharply off to the south. The party continued on the eastward path, even though they were no longer with a water supply. The afternoon darkened into night, and the jungle heat subsided.

As dusk began to gather around them, Marshall said, "We'd better stop now. Make camp here, continue in the morning. We'll get into trouble if we try to hike in the dark."

They settled in a small clearing fenced in by vaulting trees whose trunks were the thickness of a dozen men. The forest grew dark rapidly; Loki's three gleaming moon's could be seen bobbing intermittently above the trees, and a sprinkling of stars brightened the night.

Marshall said, "We'll stand watch in shifts through the night. Kyle, you take first watch. Then Lois. I'll hold down the middle slot. Mrs. Garvey, you follow me, and your husband can have the last shift. Two hours apiece ought to do it."

He opened the survival kit and handed the blaster and flare gun to Kyle. The businessman frowned and said, "What am I supposed to do?"

"Stay awake, mostly, and keep an eye out for visiting animals. And if you happen to hear an airplane overhead, shoot of one of the flares so they'll be able to find us."

"Do you think they'll send a plane this far?" Lois asked.

Marshall shook his head. "Frankly, no. But it can't do any harm to be prepared."

He and Garvey built a fire while the others collected a woodpile to use as fuel through

the night. Then the group settled down for the night. They remained close together; Marshall chose a clump of grass as his bed, while the Garvey's huddled in each other's arms not far away and Lois bedded down on the other side of the fire. Kyle, as first watch, sat near the fire.

Marshall did not find it easy to fall asleep. His senses were troubled by new sensations—the *chickk-chickk* of the jungle insects, the far-off hooting of night-flying birds, the occasional unnerving trumpet-call of some huge wandering animal settling down for the night.

The flickering of the campfire bothered him no matter how tightly he clamped his eyelids together. He remained awake a long while, squirming and shifting position, his mind full of a million thoughts and plans.

He was still half awake and dimly aware of what was happening when Kyle's shift ended, for he heard the financier talking to Lois, waking her up. But some time after that he dozed off, because he was soundly asleep when Lois came to fetch him for his shift on patrol.

HE was dreaming of some pleasant tropical isle where there was nothing to do but sleep on the beach, swim, make love, and sip mild drinks. He felt the girl's hand on his shoulder, but she had to shake him several times before he woke.

Finally he rolled over and blinked at her. "What's the matter?"

"Your turn," the girl whispered.

"Turn?" he repeated vaguely. Then he came fully awake. "Oh. I see." He got to his feet and glanced at his watch. It read two o'clock. He made a rough computation into Loki time and decided that it was about six and a half hours before dawn.

He looked around. The Garveys and Kyle were sound asleep; Kyle was even snoring. The fire was getting a bit low. Marshall added some logs to it.

"Was there any trouble?" he asked.

"No," Lois said. "Nothing

has happened. Good night."

"Good night," he replied.

She crossed the clearing and settled down to sleep. Marshall squatted by the fire and stared upward. A great white bird settled on a tree-limb above him, and the huge creature was staring down at the camp with serene indifference. For a moment Marshall seriously considered shooting the big bird with the blaster he held; it would probably provide them with enough meat for several days. But he held back, reluctant to kill anything quite so beautiful. They still had some of the deer meat left, and there was no need to kill again just yet. After a short while the bird took wing, and flew off into the darkness with solemn dignity.

Marshall paced around the camp. An hour slipped by. He looked around, saw the girl Lois sitting up, her head propped against her hand, watching him. He walked over to her.

"Why are you up?"

"I can't sleep. I'm wide awake again." she whispered. "Mind if I keep you company?"

"You ought to get some sleep," he told her.

"I know. But I can't." She got to her feet, and they strolled around the clearing together. He watched her with interest. She was certainly a lovely girl. In the past, he had never had much time to spare for women. His studies had always come first.

"How old are you?" he asked after a while.

"Nineteen," she said. "You?"

"Twenty-seven."

"You're an anthropologist?" she asked.

"Yes."

"A good one?"

"Not very," he admitted. "Just run of the mill. I came here hoping to make my fame and fortune by discovering the native life of Loki."

"You still may," she said. "Aren't they supposed to live somewhere in the jungle? Maybe we'll find them while we're travelling east."

Marshall chuckled quietly. He had been so busy with the sheer problems of survival that he had never even stopped to consider that possibility. Of

course, he thought! Wouldn't it be wonderful if I stumbled right into an alien village!

They talked for a while longer, mostly about her. She went to school on Thor, the neighboring world; she had stopped at Marleyville to visit her brother, who was in business there, before going on to see her father at New Lisbon. Evidently, Marshall thought, she had led a rather plush and sheltered life up till now. But she was bearing up pretty well under the jungle life, he thought.

When his watch read half past four, he woke up Estelle Garvey. "Your turn," he told her. "Your husband relieves you at six o'clock."

He returned to his clump of grass. Lois settled down across the way from him. He was asleep within minutes.

THEY were all up at dawn. Garvey, who was very good with his hands, had made use of his time on watch to fashion a pair of fishhooks and some line.

They discovered another small brook not too far from their campsite, and some patient angling by Garvey and Marshall provided their breakfast: small herring-like fish which had a sharp, pungent taste when cooked. After breakfast they washed up, the women bathing first, then the men. Personal privacy was being respected as best as possible among them.

They marched until noon, when the heat became almost intolerable and they were forced to stop for a siesta. Lois found a bush with round blue-green fruits the size of apples growing on it, and, after Garvey had boldly tasted one without immediate ill effects, they lunched on those and moved on half an hour later.

The forest creatures showed no fear of them. From time to time small rodents with huge hind legs would hop rabbit-fashion almost defiantly close to them, peering curiously out of gleaming blue eyes. Once a big beast clumsily blundered across their path—an animal the height of a man and about f i f t e e n feet long, which clumped along on four immense legs.

It was obviously a vegetari-

an, and just as obviously it had poor eyesight. It crossed their path only twenty feet in front of Marshall, who was in the lead, and paused briefly to gulp down a hillock of grass before continuing on its myopic way.

Morale remained high in the little band. Marshall estimated that they covered better than fourteen miles during the day, and when they stopped at sundown Garvey shot a long-eared gazelle-like animal for their dinner. Sniffing little hyenas came to investigate the kill, but rapidly scattered when Marshall hurled a rock at them. It was not worth wasting a blaster shot on such vermin.

The next day they moved on again, and that day they ran into their first serious problems in the jungle.

The initial snag came in mid-morning. The party was hacking its way through a particularly tangled stretch of pathless underbrush. Abruptly, a torrential rain descended on them—a warmish rain that fell by the bucketful, drenching them within instants. There was no time to seek cover, and no cover to be had.

The rain lasted fifteen minutes, though there were moments when Marshall felt it was going to go on forever, cascading in endless sheets. They were soaked to the skin by the time it was over.

Their c l o t h i n g, already shredded and soiled after three days of jungle life, clung to their skins as if pasted there. Gnatlike insects came to hover around the bedeviled Earthmen, stinging and buzzing and flying into ears and eyes and noses and mouths.

A glorious rainbow arched across the sky, glowing in the golden-green sunlight, but none of the Earthmen were in any mood to appreciate its beauty. They were wet and sticky and miserable. After a while, their clothes dried somewhat though the humidity assured that nothing would ever dry completely. By noontime that day, colorful molds were already beginning to form on the soaked clothing. By the time they finished the trip, Marshall thought, their clothes will have rotted completely away.

The prospect of regular drenching of this sort was not an appealing one. But, in the middle of the afternoon, a new problem presented itself. The stream that they had been following most of the day had widened suddenly into a river—and the river had taken a broad swinging curve out in front of them, where it blocked the eastward passage completely.

Marshall shaded his eyes and looked upriver. "Think we ought to try heading north for a while?" he asked.

Garvey shook his head. "Don't think it's wise to leave course, Marshall. We'd better build a raft."

It took them most of the rest of the day to complete the raft, with Garvey, as the best hand craftsman of the group, directing the work. The raft, when it was finished, was a crude but serviceable affair—several dozen logs lashed solidly together by the tough, sinewy vines that grew everywhere in the jungle. The river that had so unexpectedly blocked their route was almost a mile wide. The Terrans huddled together while Marshall and Garvey poled the rickety raft across.

They were midway across when Kyle, who was holding the blaster, suddenly pointed and shouted: "L-look!"

A snout was rising from the river's murky depths. Turning, Marshall saw the head that followed it—a head about the size of a large basketball, and mostly teeth. The neck came gliding up from the water next, yards of it. Ten, fifteen feet of neck rose above them, and still more lurked beneath the water—along with who knew how many feet of body.

The head was swaying from side to side, looming above the raft and rocking gently as if getting into the rhythm of a spring. Kyle's trembling hands held the blaster. The river creature followed smoothly along the side of the raft, studying the five people aboard, deciding which one would make the juiciest morsel.

"For God's sake, fire!" Marshall called. "Shoot, Kyle, shoot!"

But Kyle did not shoot.

With a muttered curse, Marshall sprang forward, nearly upsetting the delicate balance of the raft, and snatched the blaster from the financier's numb fingers. He lifted and fired. The river-serpent's head vanished. The long sleek neck slipped gracefully into the water. A trail of blood eddied upward toward the surface.

Lois gasped and pointed toward the water. It boiled with activity. Creatures were coming from all over to devour the dead monster.

"I'm sorry," Kyle muttered thinly. "I had the gun—I tried to fire it—but I couldn't shoot, I just couldn't. I was too scared. Marshall, dammit, I'm sorry!"

"Forget it," Marshall said. "It's dead and no harm was done." But he made a mental note to the effect that Kyle could not be trusted to act in an emergency. In the jungle, you were either quick or you were dead.

THEY reached the other side of the river without further mishap, and, abandoning the raft where it had beached itself, they continued inland.

During the next five days, they plodded steadily along. Marshall figured they had covered about a hundred miles—which sounded like a great deal, until he realized it was only one tenth of the total journey.

The five of them were changing, in those five days. Becoming less prissy, less civilized. The barriers of restraint were rapidly breaking down.

They ate foods they would never have dreamed of eating normally, ripping and rending almost raw meat to assuage their hunger. They ate less frequently too, and from day to day they grew leaner, tougher. In the past few years Marshall had let himself get slightly out of shape, but that roll of flesh around his middle had disappeared utterly in only a few days. Muscles that had not worked for many years came into regular play.

The little band did not present a very imposing picture. The men had week-old beards; the women, despite sporadic attempts at self-tidiness, were growing unkempt and very un-

feminine, with ragged, stringy hair and no makeup. As for clothing, it was diminishing rapidly, the effects of continual humidity and rain and jungle life.

Marshall's shirt had been so encrusted with violet and green molds that he had been forced to discard it. His trousers were frayed and tattered, and ended at the knee. Garvey looked similarly disheveled, while Kyle was even worse.

The insubstantial fabrics of the women's dresses had suffered the most. Lois' violet synthofab dress, which had attracted Marshall so much back in Marleyville, was a bedraggled ruin. She shed it completely on the fourth day, making do with her underclothes and some foliage bound around her breasts for the sake of modesty.

But modesty mattered very little in the jungle. It was futile to maintain the old civilized taboos under such conditions. Before the end of the first week, the five of them were bathing unashamedly together, and there was no more niggling concern with modesty or other social graces that were irrevelant in the cruel world of the jungle.

Marshall became an adept hunter. The jungle abounded in strange life-forms of every description: thick-furred creatures like little teddy-bears, that soared on bat-wings from tree to tree, forming easy targets in mid-glide and yielding deliciously tender white meat; big-beaked jungle birds of astonishing color, who ranged themselves in groups of a dozen along a tree-limb and obediently waited to be shot; curious amphibious creatures who looked like oildrums with eyes, and whose hind legs tasted like chicken; graceful fawn-like creatures that flitted through the forest like tawny ghosts, occasionally coming within range.

Making the most of his two hundred blaster charges, Marshall kept the group supplied with meat. Kyle became a surprisingly able fisherman, while the women made themselves responsible for g a t h e r i n g fruits, nuts, and vegetables, and Garvey took care of the mechanical aspects of jungle

life, the building of clearings and the fashioning of clubs and sandals and the like.

They forged forward, keeping careful track of the days and careful watch of the skies, in case a rescue ship should pass overhead. None did. But the general mood of the party was one of quiet determination. The conviction now gripped them that they would return to civilization alive.

Except for occasional brushes with the larger jungle wildlife, and a few small incidents involving snakes underfoot, there had been no serious problem. The rain, the humidity, the insects—these were inconveniences which could be tolerated. There was no reason to suspect that they would get into difficulties. All they had to do was to keep on plugging ahead.

Until the ninth day. When it suddenly became clear that their eastward march had come to an unexpected halt—perhaps permanently.

IT had been a coolish day, by jungle standards, and the group had been moving at a good pace all morning. They stopped at noon and feasted on a pair of the small green amphibious oildrum-creatures, and then moved on. Marshall, his blaster in his hand, led the way, with Lois at his side. The girl wore only sheer pants round her waist, but despite this she did not show the embarrassment she had displayed originally when it had been necessary for her to discard her useless city clothes. Her body was tanned and handsome.

Walking behind Marshall came Nathan Kyle, holding the flare-gun, with the Garveys bringing up the rear. On one of his recent evening watches Garvey had fashioned a bow and arrow outfit for himself, and he now wore the bow slung over his thick barrel chest. His wife carried the survival kit.

They cut their way through some reasonably open territory for about an hour after the lunch halt. Marshall, keeping his compass constantly in hand, maintained the consistent eastward course which he hoped would, in time, bring them to the coastal area where the colony of New Lisbon and

the other smaller coast settlements could be found.

The course took them up the side of a small, heavily-wooded rise. Marshall strode through the thick shrubbery, ignoring as best he could the droning insects that nipped at his bare legs, and down the other side of the low hill.

He stopped, staring ahead. His eyes ranged toward the next hill in the gently undulating series. Sudden amazement surged through him.

"Good God," he muttered. "Look at that!"

The others came up to him and paused with him, an anxious, frightened little group. Garvey, squinting out into the distance with his keen, experienced eyes, said finally, "I've never seen anything like it. The beast must be fifty feet high!"

"Are you sure?" Marshall asked.

"At least that much. It's standing in a clump of rhizome trees that grow to about forty feet, never less, and you can see the creature's head bobbing up over the damned trees!"

Marshall was conscious of Lois pressing up against him, her hand gripping his arm in sudden fright. He put his free arm around her to steady her. But he was frightened himself: He had never seen anything quite like the beast that stood squarely in their path, no more than five hundred yards ahead.

The creature was vaguely humanoid in shape—that is, if it had any meaning to describe such a monster as humanoid. It towered above the trees, but through the shrubbery Marshall could see that it stood on two massive legs that seemed almost like treetrunks themselves. The being was covered entirely with thick, metallic-looking scales that glinted blue-green in the sunlight. Its immense head consisted mostly of mouth; fangs more than six inches long were visible. The eyes were like blazing beacons, as big as dishes—but they were not the eyes of a beast. There was unmistakable intelligence in them.

As they watched, one gigantic arm swooped upward through the air. For an instant, eight huge fingers were spread wide. Then they closed tight, imprisoning a bat-like

flying reptile the way a man might pounce on a small insect. The trumpeting sound of the frightened pterodactyl echoed for a moment in the forest; then, the mouth yawned, the arm went toward it.

The mouth closed. The monster had devoured an appetizing morsel—a pleasant midday snack. As if to signal its pleasure it rumbled groundshakingly, a fierce bellow of content. Then it turned, and, sending saplings crashing all around, began to stride toward the group of humans huddled at the foot of the hill.

MARSHALL was the first to react. "Come on," he said harshly. "Maybe it senses us. Let's split up before we all wind up as lunch for that thing."

With a rough shove, he sent Nathan Kyle plunging away into the underbrush. Garvey needed no hint; he and his wife faded off the road into a sheltered spot. Marshall glanced at him, saw him stringing his bow and notching an arrow into place.

Marshall and Lois crouched down behind a thick shrub and waited. He gripped the blaster tight, holding it in readiness, but even as he opened the safety he paused to think that the blaster was a futile weapon to use against a monster of this size.

Lois whispered, "What *is* that thing? I've never heard of a life-form that size."

"Neither have I. This is just something that's lurked in this unexplored jungle without ever getting seen from the air. And it's just our luck to be the ones to discover it!"

"Does it know where we are?"

Marshall shrugged. "Something that size probably doesn't have very highly developed sense organs. But it may have seen us. And it may be hungry."

"I hope not."

The creature was getting closer. Marshall could feel the ground quivering as each ponderous foot descended to the jungle floor. It was like a distant drumbeat....*boom*....*boom*...*boom*...*boom*...

Abruptly the booming stopped. That meant, Marshall

thought, that the monster had to be very close—and perhaps was pausing a few yards away, searching for the small creatures it had seen from the distance. He held his breath and warily looked over his shoulder.

Two legs were planted like treetrunks no more than twenty yards away from him. He caught his breath sharply. Lois turned to see what he was looking at; her mouth widened as if she were about to scream, and Marshall instantly clapped his hand over it.

She relaxed. He lifted his hand from her mouth and put a finger to his lips, indicating silence.

They turned round to see the creature.

It did not seem to notice them. Marshall's gaze rose, up the giant legs, past the thick midsection of the body, to the head. Yes there was no doubt about it—there was intelligence in those eyes. But an alien intelligence. And it was the face of a carnivorous creature that would hardly stop to wonder before devouring them.

It had come to a halt and was peering round, spreading the brush apart with its monstrous paws, hunting for the hidden Earthmen. Marshall prayed that Garvey, on the other side of the creature, would not decide to open fire with his bow. The monster evidently had a poor sense of smell, and the humans were well hidden under the shrubbery. With luck, they might avoid being seen. Perhaps the creature, cheated of its prey, would simply continue on its way through the jungle, allowing them to move along toward New Lisbon without harm.

Long moments passed. The creature, with seemingly cosmic patience, was still standing there, probing the underbrush with its enormous fingers. Marshall kept the blaster cocked and ready in case he should be uncovered. No doubt Garvey was waiting, too, with his wife.

How about Kyle? Marshall remembered the way Kyle had choked up when the sea-serpent had risen from the depths of the river. How was the financier reacting now, with hideous death looming not far overhead?

Marshall found out a moment later.

Kyle began to scream.

"Help! Help me! It's going to find me! Marshall! Garvey! Kill it before it catches me!"

His pitiful wails rang out loudly. Marshall saw the feet of the monster rise and move in the direction of the sound.

"No! No!" Kyle yelled.

"Stay here and don't move from the spot," Marshall told Lois. "I've got to protect Kyle. The idiot! The absolute idiot!"

He moved in a half-crouch through the underbrush. Kyle was still yelling in hysterical fear. Marshall kept going until he reached Garvey. The solidly built colonist had his bow drawn tight and was looking around.

"The creature's just over to the left," Garvey informed him. "It heard Kyle squalling and now it's going to have a look."

Marshall craned his neck back. Yes, there was the creature, hovering high above the forest floor.

"Help me! Please don't let it get me!" Kyle was still wailing.

The creature stooped suddenly. It reached into the underbrush; its fingers closed around something. Then it straightened up. Marshall saw something impossibly tiny-looking held in the monster's hand, and he had to force himself to realize that the kicking, squirming creature the monster held was a human being.

"Let's go," Marshall said. "It's caught Kyle. Maybe we can kill it."

THE monster was staring at Kyle with deep curiosity. The Earthman blubbered and screamed. Gently, the huge creature touched Kyle with an inch-long fingernail. Kyle moaned and prayed for release.

"Should we fire?" Garvey asked.

"Wait a minute. Maybe it'll set him down. It seems fascinated by him."

"It's never seen an Earthman before," Garvey said. "Maybe it'll decide Kyle isn't edible."

"He deserves whatever he gets," Marshall grunted. "But it's our duty as Earthmen to

try to save him. Suppose you take a pot-shot at the hand that's holding Kyle. Think you can hit the alien without nailing Kyle?"

"I'll do my best," Garvey said grimly.

He drew the bowstring back and let the arrow fly—straight and true, humming through the air and burying itself deep in the wrist of the hand that grasped Kyle round the middle.

The creature paused in its examination of Kyle. It probed with a forefinger of the other hand at the arrow that was embedded in its flesh. Suddenly, it tossed Kyle to the ground like a doll it had tired of, and advanced toward the place where Marshall and Garvey crouched hidden behind two gigantic palm-fronds.

"Here it comes," Marshall muttered. "We'd better shoot to kill. You go for the eyes with your arrows, and I'll aim for the legs and try to cut the thing down to our size."

The ground was shaking again. Marshall's hand gripped the blaster butt tightly. Suddenly the monster emitted an earsplitting howl of defiance and kicked over the tree that had been sheltering them.

Marshall fired first, aiming his blaster bolt straight into the thick leg in front of him. The energy beam was opened to the widest possible aperture. It played on the leg for a moment but barely seemed to pierce the surface. The creature was virtually armor-plated. Marshall glanced back at Garvey. The colonist had already shot two more arrows—Marshall saw them sticking out of the creature's face—and he was notching a third arrow.

The monster stooped over, slapping at the foliage as if irritated by the sudden attack rather than angry. One paw swept inches over Marshall's head. He fired a second bolt into the same place as the first had gone, and saw a break in the scales now. The monster roared in pain and lifted its wounded leg high.

The leg thrashed around, kicking and trampling. Suddenly a sidewise swipe of an open hand caught Marshall and sent him sprawling, half unconscious. He landed near Kyle. The financier, Marshall saw, was not in good shape.

Blood was trickling from his mouth and one of his legs was grotesquely twisted. Kyle's face was a pale white with fear and shock. He did not seem to be conscious.

Marshall struggled to his feet. He became aware that the alien's struggles had slackened somewhat. Running back to Garvey's side, he looked up and saw an arrow arch upward and bury itself in the center of one huge yellow eyeball.

"Bullseye!" Garvey yelled.

The scream of pain that resulted seemed to fill the entire jungle. Marshall grinned at the colonist and gripped his blaster again.

He fired—three times. The charges burrowed into the weakened place in the monster's leg, and suddenly the great being slipped to one knee. Unafraid now, the two men dashed out into the open. Garvey's final arrow pierced the remaining eye of the giant. A shrill cry of pain resulted. Marshall raised his blaster, centering the sights on the monster's ruined eye, hoping that his shot would supply the *coup de grace.*

"Yes," a deep, throbbing voice said. *"Kill me. It would be well. I long to die."*

MARSHALL was so stunned he lowered his blaster. Turning to Garvey he said, "Did you hear that?"

"It sounded like—like a voice."

"I was the one who spoke. I speak directly to your minds. Why do you not kill me?"

"Great Jehosaphat!" Garvey cried. "The monster's talking!"

"It's a telepath," Marshall said. "It's intelligent and it's able to communicate with us!"

"I ask for death," came the solemn thought.

Marshall stared at the great being. It had slumped down on both its knees now, and it held its hands over its shattered eyes. Even so, its head was more than twenty feet above the ground.

"Who—what are you?" Marshall asked.

"I am nothing now and soon will be even less. Twenty thousand years ago my people ruled this world. Today I am the only one. And soon I too will be gone—killed by tiny creatures I can hardly see."

Marshall heard a rustling sound behind him and glanced over his shoulder to see Lois and Garvey's wife come hesitantly out of hiding, now that the danger seemed to be past.

Marshall felt a twinge of awe. To think of a world ruled by beings such as these—and to think of them all gone except this one, their cities buried under thousands of years of jungle growth, their very bones rotted by the planet's warmth and lost forever. What a sight it must have been, a city of titans such as these!

"Why do you not kill me?" the being asked telepathically.

"What's happening?" Lois asked.

Marshall said, "Garvey hit the creature in the eyes with arrows, and I knocked him down by blasting his legs. But he seems to be intelligent. And he's pleading with us to put him out of his misery."

"That thing—intelligent?"

"Once we had science and arts and poetry," came the slow, mournful telepathic voice. *"But our civilization withered and died. Children no longer were born, and the old ones died slowly away. Until at last only I was left, eating animals and living the life of a beast in the jungle...."*

"How can you be sure you're the last?" Marshall asked. "Maybe there are other survivors."

"When others lived my mind was attuned to them. But for many years I have known nothing but silence on this world. I did not know beings your size could be intelligent....I beg your pardon if I have injured the companion of yours who I seized in my curiosity. Will you not give me the satisfaction of death at last?"

Marshall felt deep sadness as he watched blood stream down the alien's face—yellow-brown blood. If only they had known, if only the being had not been so fearsome in appearance, if only it had made telepathic contact with them sooner—

If. Well, it was too late now.

"Isn't there some way we can help it?" Lois asked.

Marshall shook his head. "We're hundreds of miles from civilization. We'll be

lucky to get back alive ourselves. And I crippled it with my blaster."

"Only thing to do is put it out of its misery," Garvey said flatly.

"Yes. I am in great pain and wish to die."

Marshall lifted the blaster regretfully. Only a few moments before he had been shooting to kill, shooting what he thought was a ferocious and deadly creature. And, he thought, unwittingly he had destroyed the last of an ancient an awe-inspiring race.

Now he had no choice. It was wrong to permit this noble creature to suffer, to be eaten alive by the blood-hungry jungle creatures.

His finger tightened on the blaster.

"I thank you for giving me peace," the alien telepathed. *"My loneliness at last will end."*

Marshall fired.

The energy bolt pierced the already broken eye of the monster and seared its way through to the brain. The vast creature toppled forward on its face, kicked convulsively as the message of death passed through its huge and probably tremendously complex nervous system. In a moment it was all over except for a quivering of the outstretched limbs, and that soon stopped.

Marshall stared at the great body face down on the jungle floor. Then he turned away.

"Let's go see how Kyle is," he said. "The alien picked him up and dropped him again when we opened fire. I think he's in bad shape."

The four of them stepped around the corpse of the fallen alien and made their way to the place where Kyle lay. The financier had not moved. Marshall bent over him, pointing to the livid bruises that stood out on Kyle's body.

"Fingerprints," Marshall said. "The big boy had a pretty strong grip."

Kyle's eyes opened and he looked wildly around. "The monster," he said in a thick, barely intelligible voice. "Don't let it touch me! Don't—"

Kyle slumped over, his head rolling loosely to one side. A fresh trickle of blood began to issue from between his lips, but it stopped almost at once.

Marshall knelt, putting his ear to Kyle's chest.

After a moment he looked up.

"How is he?" Garvey asked.

Marshall shrugged. "He's dead, I'm afraid. The shock of the whole thing, and the internal hemorrhages caused by the creature's grip on him—"

"And he fell about twenty feet," Garvey pointed out.

Marshall nodded. "We'd better bury him before the local fauna comes around for their meal. And then we'll get back on the path to New Lisbon."

THEY dug a grave at the side of the clearing and lowered Kyle's body in. Garvey bound two sticks together crosswise with a bit of vine, and planted them at the head of the grave. No one even suggested a burial for the dead alien. It would have been totally impossible to move a creature of such bulk at all. Its weight was probably many tons, Marshall estimated.

It was nearly nightfall by the time they were finished interring Kyle, but the party moved along anyway, since no one was anxious to camp for the night close to the scene of the violence. Few words were spoken. The brief and tragic encounter with the huge alien, and Kyle's death, had left them drained of emotion, with little to say to each other.

The next day, they continued to forge eastward. Marshall was still obsessed with the thought of the dead alien.

"Imagine," he said to Lois. "An entire planet full of giants like that—can you picture even a city of them? Fantastic!"

"And all gone," Lois said.

"Yes. Every one. Not a fossil remains. If we ever get back to civilization, I hope to be able to organize a search party to bring back the skeleton of that giant. It'll be quite an exhibit at the Galactic Science Museum, if we ever find it."

In the distance, a hyena cackled. A huge shadow crossed the path in front of them—the shadow of an enormous flying reptile winging its solitary way over the jungle. Far away, the rhythmic bel-

lowing of some jungle creatures resounded echoingly.

Marshall wondered if they ever would get back. They had covered many miles, sure enough, but they had not yet even reached the halfway point in their journey to New Lisbon. And who knew what dangers still lay ahead for them?

They marched on, through that day and the next, and the one after that. Heat closed in around them like a veil, and the rain was frequent and annoying. But they managed. They killed for meat, and fished when they came to water, and by this time they had all become experts on which vegetables were edible and which were likely to provide a night of indigestion and cramps.

Day blurred into day. Marshall's beard became long and tangled. They looked like four jungle creatures rather than four Earthmen.

And then, one day shortly after high noon—

"Look!" Garvey yelled shrilly. "Look up there, everyone! Look!"

Marshall could hear the droning sound even before he could raise his eyes. He looked up, feeling the pulse of excitement go through him. There, limned sharply against the bright metallic blueness of the afternoon sky, a twin-engine plane circled the jungle!

FOR a moment they were all too numb, too stupefied with joy to react. Marshall was the first to break from his stasis.

"The flare-gun—where is it?"

"In the survival kit!" Garvey exclaimed.

Hasty hands ripped open the fabric of the kit that had served them so long. Marshall hurriedly jerked out the flare-gun, inserted a charge with fumbling fingers, lifted the gun, fired.

A blaze of red light blossomed in the sky. Shading his eyes, Marshall saw the plane wheel round to investigate. He inserted another flare and fired it.

"Shirts off, everyone! Signal to them!"

They waved frantically. Minutes passed; then, the

hatch of the plane opened and a small dark object dropped through. A parachute bellied open immediately. The plane circled the area and streaked off toward the east.

Through some sort of miracle, the parachute did not become snagged in the trees on the way down, and the package came to rest not far from where the four stood. Marshall and the others ran for it. They found a note pinned to the wrapping:

We were just about to give up hope of ever finding any of the crash survivors when we saw the flares go up. Your area is too heavily wooded to allow for a landing, and so we're returning to New Lisbon to get a 'copter. Remain exactly where you are now. We expect to be back in about two hours. In the meantime we're dropping some provisions to tide you over until we return.

"We're going to be rescued!" Lois cried. "They've found us!"

"It's like a miracle!" Garvey's wife exclaimed.

The two hours seemed to take forever. The four squatted over the provisions kit, munching with delight on chocolate and fruit, and smoking their first cigarettes since the day of the crash.

Finally they heard the droning sound of a helicopter's rotors overhead.

There it was—descending vertically, coming to a halt in their clearing. Three men sprang from the helicopter the moment it reached the ground. One wore the uniform of a medic. They sprinted toward the survivors. Marshall became uncomfortably aware of his own uncouth appearance, and saw the women attempting to cover the exposed parts of their anatomy in sudden newfound modesty.

"Well! I'm Captain Collins of the New Lisbon airbase. I certainly didn't expect to be picking up any survivors of that crash!"

"My name's David Marshall," Marshall said. He introduced the others.

"You the only survivors?"

Marshall nodded. "A fifth man was thrown from the plane alive, but he died later. We're the only ones who sur-

vived. How far are we from New Lisbon?"

"Oh, three hundred fifty miles, I'd say."

Marshall frowned. "Three hundred fifty? That means we covered better than six hundred miles on foot since the crash. But aren't you a little far from home base? How come you searched for us here?"

The New Lisbon man looked uncomfortable. "Well, to tell the truth, it was a kind of a hunch. We got this crazy message—"

"Message?"

"Yes. A few days back. Damn near everyone in the colony heard it. It was a kind of telepathic voice telling us that there were still a few survivors from the crash, and giving an approximate position. So we sent out a few scouts. Say, anyone of you folks a telepath?"

"No, not us," Marshall said. "It must have been the alien."

"Alien? You met an alien?"

"Past tense. He's dead." Marshall smiled oddly. "But he must have decided to do us one last favor before he died. In return for the favor we were doing him. He must have broadcast a telepathic message to New Lisbon."

The New Lisbon man eyed Marshall strangely. "Are you telling me that you found an intelligent alien in the jungle?"

"That's right. And we're going to go back and locate his body, and see if we can preserve it for science. It's the least we can do for him. At least one remnant of his race will be preserved. They won't die away without leaving a trace," Marshall said, as he walked toward the helicopter that would take him back to civilization.

THE END

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THE ABOMINABLE CREATURE

by F. X. FALLON

No living thing as loathsome and vile as this creature had ever been known in the universe before. The horror of its way of life was too much for a human to endure

THE big, beefy man opposite me raised the crystal goblet in one ham-like fist and drained the Martian absinthe fizz in a single thirsty guzzle. On the Lunar colony there are no restrictions on certain liquors as there are on earth, and everything—but everything—is wide open.

Oh well, every man to his own poison. And his vice showed in the ruin of what had once been a strong, intelligent face. Yet, behind the mask of dissipation, I thought I saw something in his eyes—something haunted... Something he would like to push back into oblivion, but could not.

He wiped his mouth on the back of one hairy hand, and with the other hurled the now empty glass against the wall of the private booth. It shattered, and the pieces fell tinkling and added to the growing pile of glittering glass fragments on the floor. A waiter hurried up and obsequiously placed another glass of the green liquor in front of Big Mike Sill, ignoring the broken glass as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and then withdrew silently.

I waited patiently for him to speak. As a young reporter for Interplanetary News Service, I had stumbled on an un-



believable piece of good luck. An interview with Big Mike Sill could make my reputation as a reporter. Here was the man who, two years ago, had suddenly sold out his Museum of All Planets and retired with a fortune that could have paid for the Lunar colony twice over.

The funny thing was that he retired at the height of his success and in the prime of life, and started on his perpetual interplanetary bender, never stopping long in one place, as if he were running away.

IF you've been on Earth in the last five years, you've been to the Museum of All Planets. There have been imitators since, but Big Mike was the first. He paid the best prices for specimens from all the known planets and their moons, and crazy space jockeys competed with each other getting maimed and killed collecting bigger and better horrors for his collections.

You know, people are morbid. The biggest attraction was the giant spider from the forest of Venus' only land mass. You could always find the biggest crowds around the cage when the keeper dropped a live, kicking slug-beast into the twenty-foot web, and that God-awful hairy body pushed out into the dim light of the cage from its silk-strand-covered hiding place and danced across the thick strands of the web like a ballerina from hell. It took a strong stomach, though, to watch it pounce on the shrilling slug-beast with dripping mandibles and carry it off to be sucked dry in leisure.

The biggest thrill came that day when the giant-sized tarantula became a mother... It seems that the keeper was dropping the daily ration of live meat into the center of the quivering web from the trapdoor overhead, when one of the onlookers spotted a movement near the roof of the cage and screamed a warning. It was too late... A *baby* spider with a body about the size of a football, more or less, had managed to climb the iron grillwork where its mother would have been too heavy to pull herself up.

While ordinary civilians

screamed and fainted, and even toughened spacemen turned away and pressed their handkerchiefs to their mouths, the infant sprang on the keeper and fastened itself to his throat. He shouted once, more with surprise than terror, and threw up his hands to ward off the eight-legged monstrosity. He lost his balance and fell, together with the slug-beast, into the center of the web...

The mother spider, with maternal restraint, remained in her hidey-hole. Or maybe she just wasn't hungry that day... But another dozen of her brood came scampering out of the sack and swarmed over the keeper and the slug-beast, hungry and greedy for their first taste of warm mammalian blood. I guess the bite of the first young one had instantly paralyzed the keeper, for he did not scream again, and his arms and legs jerked more with reflex motion than with conscious struggling. With a dozen of those things draining his blood, it must have been over very fast. At least, I hope so...

There was a big scandal about that incident. One of the partners of the expedition that had brought the giant spider back and sold it to Big Mike, confessed that when they had captured it in its native habitat, they had found the dried-out husk of another, somewhat smaller spider. Any entomologist could have told them that their live specimen was probably a female and, like others of her kind, had made a meal of her spouse after the honeymoon was over. And since it was a fertilized female, a brood would be the next thing. But Big Mike denied that he had been told anything of the sort or that he even suspected it, and who could prove it?

Then there was the time a harmless-looking thing from Titan, looking like nothing so much as a ball of fur balanced on four dainty legs, unexpectedly threw out a feeler several yards long, like the tongue of an ant-eater, and stung two bystanders with a poisoned barb in the tip, turning them into swollen purple masses in a matter of minutes. That one cost Mike Sill a cool half-million dollars in damages paid to the families of the victims, and resulted in all the 'animal'

cages being enclosed in glass as well as steel mesh.

BIG Mike looked across the table at me, twirling the new goblet of absinthe, relishing the anticipation.

"I like you, young fellow," he rasped. "You remind me of the time when I was starting out, full of energy and ideas. That's why I'm giving you this interview. Big Mike Sill's first official interview in two years!"

He laughed hollowly and raised the goblet. But this time he sipped reflectively, his dark-rimmed, sunken eyes staring with horrified fascination into the distance at some thought or remembered scene.

So intense was his stare that I shuddered and glanced involuntarily over my left shoulder, but there was nothing behind me but the public bar, where spacemen and their companions of the evening mingled with engineers and their ladies.

I looked back again. Mike Sill had set his half-empty goblet down and cradled his face in his hands. I coughed discreetly and he lifted his head again, fixing me with his deep-set, shadowed eyes. He rubbed his forehead abstractedly.

"Oh yes, young fellow," he rumbled, "I was going to tell you all about why Big Mike retired from the specimen collecting business and became the biggest lush on three planets and four moons!" He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "But will you ever believe what I tell you? Will anybody believe what you tell *them?* Will they believe that there was anything so awful that it drove tough Mike Sill into selling out his business for half its worth?"

He struck the table heavily. "Bah," he rasped scornfully, "they think it was those accidents at the Museum of All Planets that drove me out of the business."

He leaned forward confidentially, and whispered in hoarse tones: "The worst of them all was never shown to the public —and never will be!" He shuddered then. "There are some things that should *never* be seen. That's why I got out of the specimen business, fast. I was afraid of what some

money-hungry space prospector would show up with next."

He drained the goblet and this time merely tossed it limply into a corner, as though all the strength had gone out of him. He waved away the waiter this time. "No more for a while," he said thickly, "I promised this young man a story." The waiter bowed and withdrew, closing the soundproof glass door with the one-way vision.

With the sounds of talking and laughing and music from the public bar cut off, the private cubicle was heavily silent, and I could now make out Big Mike's labored breathing. His ruddy face had taken on a congested, purplish-veined appearance, and I grew alarmed, having read something of the deleterious effects of continued absinthe drinking.

He saw my expression and smiled sardonically. "Don't worry," he chuckled, "I'm not going to pass out or die on you." He drew a small gold pillbox from one pocket, extracted a greenish pill and popped it into his mouth. His color improved rapidly. "Ah, that's better," he sighed.

"You were going to tell me—?" I prompted.

He shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know, I don't know... Will they ever believe you? Many a young reporter has tried to crash into the by-line set by padding up a story."

I tapped my notebook with my pencil, pointing to the preliminary notes I had made. "I can take down your story in longhand," I offered anxiously, "and you could sign it to verify the authenticity. How about it?"

He thought for a moment. "All right," he said suddenly, "a promise is a promise. And maybe it will serve as a warning to other zoo-men and specimen hunters who are eager to follow in my footsteps."

His eyes widened in fear. He put out one big, hairy hand and rested it heavily on mine. "Be sure to tell them that they can't be too careful. Life takes many forms throughout the universe, and some day they may stumble on something they can't hold in a net or a trap or a cage, or in anything

else. When you end your story, tell them that!"

I remained respectfully silent while he seemed to be gathering his thoughts. The waiter stood outside the closed door, not seeing us, but knowing that we could see him. I pressed the button that flashed a red light above the entrance, indicating that service was not now desired, an admirable feature where couples often wanted privacy along with their intimacy...

I sat with my notebook open and my pencil poised.

IT happened two years ago of course, said Mike. I was in my office in the tower over the entrance to the museum and zoo, with a deskful of ringing telephones and the chairs filled with hopeful space prospectors and just plain bums. It was a standing rule that no live specimens were brought to me there, no matter how small, or innocent-looking, because you never knew what these alien specimens were capable of doing.

Then too of course, there was always the quarantine at the spaceports. If I accepted an alien beast, it had to be put through an incubation lab to see whether any dangerous germs could be bred from it. If not, it was then transported to the zoo in a sealed car.

So the procedure was for the hopefuls to bring me photos of their pets to see whether they were desirable for the zoo. Some were obviously touched up to bring out some unusual feature of the specimen, or to put one in where there wasn't any. And some were duplications of creatures I already had. I quickly weeded out the phonies and the duplications, and bought a pair of ten-foot-long rock scorpions from Titan, from one of my old reliable suppliers. Then he left, and I was all ready to go out to lunch when I heard a light cough, and for the first time saw this wizened old space rat practically swallowed up in the velvet cushions of one of my plush divans reserved for visiting VIP's.

"You'll have to leave now," I snapped. "Come back in about two hours with your photos. I'm going out to lunch now."

He raised his five feet and one hundred and twenty pounds of bone and gristle out of the divan. He smiled with a smirk that made me feel like I needed a shower, and his voice was like oil drained off after ten thousand miles of driving.

"I got something for you," he oozed, "the likes of which there never was and ain't anywhere else, except right in my ship. I ain't even registered it for quarantine yet. I want you to have first look at it, Mr. Sill."

I shook my head impatiently, and headed for the door, taking him by one scrawny arm and pulling him after me. "Not now, my friend," I repeated. "Wait outside if you like. I'll be back around three o'clock."

He held back with surprising strength, and I was about to call out to my male secretary to help me throw the little spacer out, as long as he was going to be obstinate. But then he reached into an inner pocket of his filthy coveralls and pulled out a wrinkled snapshot. I snatched it from his hand and released his arm suddenly.

"What on earth is it?" I muttered curiously.

"Not on earth," he chuckled. "Venus. Found it in one of those deep caves everybody else is afraid to go into!" He stood with his hands on his hips, relishing my curiosity.

It was a photo of a large glass tank, half full of water, and reinforced with bands of metal running horizontally around the four sides, and the whole thing topped with a plastic cover hinged at one side and fastened down with a padlock at the opposite side. In the background I could see the rungs of a ladder set against one wall, indicating that the tank was in the cargo compartment of a one-man space scouter.

Besides the metal straps running around the four walls of the tank, vision of the thing inside was further obscured—perhaps intentionally—by the dim light coming from the single fluorescent overhead. But I could make out this big gray blob floating or swimming in the center. It was shapeless—yet, not quite. There was something tantalizingly famil-

iar in the portion of the swimmer that stuck above the level of the water.

I turned the picture this way and that, trying to get it in a better light. "Looks like an oversized jellyfish or ameba," I grunted indifferently. "Maybe no one has ever found one that large, but aside from that, what's so unusual about it?"

The little man took back the photo, looked at it lovingly, and thrust it back under his coveralls. "I know that ain't a very good picture," he grinned. "Poor light. Ought to see it for yourself to do it justice."

I said, casually, "Why the big tank? Your overgrown ameba is almost lost in it."

"Got to give it room to grow," he rasped, still grinning. "Wouldn't be surprised if it was going to split in two pretty soon, far as that goes!"

I tried to prod him again. "Yes, old-timer, but what does it do? I have an aquarium full of marine life that make this blob almost lovable."

He poked me in the chest with a bony forefinger. "Mister Sill, this here animal's a zoo and a 'quarium all rolled in one." He licked his lips. "I been trainin' it, in a way..."

"Training it?" I repeated incredulously. "What can a shapeless mass of protoplasm like that learn?" I turned to leave again. He seized my coat sleeve.

"Mr. Sill," he whined earnestly, dropping the oily smile that he evidently considered suave, "I'll make a deal with you. If this little honey of mine ain't everything I say it is, you can have it for free. I'll leave it up to you. Fair enough?"

Since I usually paid a thousand dollars and up for new items, depending on their rarity and shock value, I thought the offer was worth thirty minutes of my time, and told the old codger so.

But I still said he would have to wait until I got back to the office from lunch. No use showing too much interest and giving him a bargaining point. I figured that the minimum fee of a thousand would be just about right, and had no desire to haggle with him to bring down an over-inflated estimate.

So I left him outside in the waiting room and went to

lunch. The smile was back *on* his face as I took off. He knew he had me hooked.

WHEN I got back at three o'clock he was waiting patiently. I told the receptionist I might be gone for an hour or so, or just possibly for the rest of the afternoon, and not to make any more appointments for me that day. The little space rat and I took the elevator to the roof, where we climbed into my private helicopter and headed for the space port. Clem Linton, as he finally identified himself, guided me to the farthest and dingiest outlying strip of the port, where berthing fees were cheapest. I set the whirlybird down near a small ship of ancient vintage that looked as if it leaked air through the seams of the entrance lock when it got out into space. We climbed out of the 'copter and crunched over gravel to where the old ship loomed like an abandoned watch tower in the late afternoon sun.

Clem Linton opened the outer lock on hinges that actually creaked, and led the way inside. I had to stoop to get through the entrance. It was like walking into a dark, musty cave. I stumbled over the rim of the inner lock. Then I heard a *click* as my guide threw a switch, and the interior was coldly lighted by a single fluorescent set in the wall.

He led the way down a short corridor so narrow that I had to walk partially sideways to get through. "How on earth did you ever get that tank in your hold?" I asked.

"Cargo lock," he answered shortly. "Other side, ground level." We came to a round trapdoor set in the metal floor. "Here we are," he added, and raised the lid with surprising ease. I followed him down the short ladder into the dimly lighted cargo hold and looked around as I stepped off the last rung.

They say that there is no such thing as instinctive fear, that we learn to be afraid of the dark, and of snakes and bugs and crawly things. Maybe they're right. Maybe it was the few loose feathers on the floor, and the big tuft of fur floating on the surface of the water in one corner of the tank,

and the various birds and animals huddled in terrified, abject silence in the cages set in the corners of the hold—all this might have combined to make the hairs at the back of my neck stand up and an invisible icicle to drip lazily down my spine. But I don't think so.

Clem danced up to the side of the tank, rubbing his hands gleefully and singing a few bars from that ribald old army song from the twentieth century:

"Bless 'em all, bless 'em all,
"The long and the short and the tall."

I followed him slowly over to the tank. It only came up to my shoulders, but it was over his head. A stepladder leaning against one side showed how he got to the hatch on the top.

I stared, fascinated, at the thing floating in the center of the pool. It was a big, dirty gray blob, without tentacles, or fins, or any external features. You might not even have thought it alive, were it not for the slowly pulsing sac near the center, like a primitive heart, and the channels radiating from it, flowing with a sluggish 'blood' of a faintly green tinge. Otherwise it was very quiet, as if asleep, or waiting. As for size, I judged it to be five feet in diameter.

Clem seemed to read my thoughts. "Weren't always that big," he crooned. "I fed it and nursed it. See that fish bowl over there?" My gaze followed his pointing arm to a fair-sized bowl in which a number of goldfish swam lazily. "I brung it home from Venus in that. Then as I fed it and it kept growin' bigger, I had to keep gettin' bigger bowls. But that ain't all I found out about it, not by a long shot, mister." And he began to do the song and dance routine again. I felt that he was more than a little off center.

"Step up a little closer and look real hard," he gurgled gleefully. I pressed my nose against the glass reluctantly. Even with the barrier between me and *that,* I didn't want to get close.

After a minute of hard staring, I saw that the glob of protoplasm was rotating slowly, as though stirred by a slow cur-

rent. And as the far side swept languidly into view, I could make out faint, shadowy traceries in the murky interior.

They were the skeletons of small birds and animals and fishes, complete in every detail but reduced to almost complete transparency, like plastic models.

"NOW watch this, watch this!" the wizened space rat chortled, and bounded to one of the cages in a dark corner. He pulled out a trembling white mouse and approached the tank. Then he held the mouse close to the glass, dangling it by its tail. At first I thought he was going to feed it to the giant ameba, but all he did was hold it close to the glass wall.

The blob began to move.

I watched, frozen, as the thing flowed ever so slowly to the side of the tank where Clem stood with his white mouse. I have seen many horrors from the inner and outer planets in my day, but the approach of this faceless spheroid of flesh made my blood run cold. At last it was on the side of the tank near Clem, and paused only inches from the barrier, about one eighth of it protruding above the surface, and the rest of the mass below, like a gelatinous iceberg.

A ripple began to stir on the slimy portion that stuck out above the surface. Then little bumps arose and grew larger, like bubbles rising to the surface of molasses or pitch. But they did not burst. They merged together. They melted and flowed and finally settled into a recognizable shape.

A white mouse. The shape of a white mouse.

Oh, it was not too perfect; there was no fur, for example, but otherwise it was a good reproduction. I even thought I could see terror in the rudimentary eyes of the false-mouse, as if it almost had an independent existence of its own.

"Now watch." Clem returned the real mouse to its cage. While I watched, hypnotized by the sight, the pseudo-mouse began to melt and run together like wax over a flame, and sank down finally and disappeared into the parent mass.

Half an hour passed while he took creature after creature and held it up to the silent mimic in the tank, and one after one I saw their reproductions form on that awful bulk.

"Of course," Clem remarked at one point, "I have to feed one specimen to it before it can do an imitation. You might say it's a collector, just like you, Mr. Sill."

At last I managed to croak, "But what—how? I mean, what's the purpose of the whole thing?" I sat down on a nearby stool and mopped my brow.

"Well, now," he said proudly, "I'm not one of them scientists, but I give it a lot of thought in the last few weeks, and got me a good idea why. It's a lure."

"A *lure?*" I think I must have looked stupid.

"Sure," he said with a superior smirk. "When you go fishin' you put a lure on the end of your line—something that looks like a tasty bug to a fish, and it swallows the hook. Now, my baby here, why she goes one better, and imitates what's in front of her, to make it come closer. Even a fish is smart enough some times, or just plain not hungry, so's not to bite at a lure. But what could be more friendly-like than somebody of your own kind? You'd just naturally go up to him or her to pass the time of day."

He patted the glass wall fondly. "Now my baby here is real smart. She does just that—makes out like she's something else, and then when the curious critter gets close: *snap!* She throws out a sort of ropy thing and pulls it in and has her dinner. Found out she could do this accidental, and been feedin' her all sorts of bugs and animals, and birds and fishes."

I could imagine the delight he must have taken in feeding it, with the playful cruelty of of a small boy dropping flies into a spider's web.

"And the beauty of it is," he went on enthusiastically, "is the more you feed her, the bigger she grows and the more imitations she can do. Why there just ain't no end to it!" He wound up his sales pitch out of breath. "How about it now, Mister Sill," he concluded, squinting craftily, "will ten

thousand be right for little honey here?"

I stroked my chin as if considering his offer. "Five thousand is tops," I said firmly.

The first look of disappointment was quickly replaced by the greedy look again. "Tell you what," he said. "I got some improvements in mind. If they work out, maybe you'd raise the price some?"

"If it's a real addition to what you already have here, I'll think about it." I got up and stretched, as if I was beginning to get a little bored or tired. "Well," I added, "when you make your improvements, call me at my office and I'll try to get out again. So long for now."

He preceded me up the iron ladder, through the narrow passage way and out onto the space port, almost bowing and scraping like a waiter leading a big tipper to his favorite table. It was already getting dark outside. I had not realized how long we had been down in the stuffy hold. Clem grabbed my hand and shook it as we parted. Once back in my 'copter, I wiped it on my trousers leg.

TWO days later in mid-afternoon I picked up the phone and heard that oily voice on the other end. It was Clem, and he was excited.

"L i s t e n, Mister Sill, it worked! It worked! My improvement! I just never fed it anything so big. Couldn't afford expensive meat. I fed it a dog, Mister Sill, a big dog, a Collie, and brought another one along to make it imitate

"Now listen careful," he sputtered excitedly. "I rented me a radio-telephone and got it here in the hold now. I'm goin' to lead the real Collie up to the side of the tank. Listen!"

Then there was the sound of the radio-telephone cabinet being drawn across the floor of the distant ship, followed by faint footsteps and a pathetic bark. I could see that foul dungeon in my mind's eye. There was a minute of silence, then an agonized help as Clem did something to the live dog to make it 'talk.' Then I heard the second sound, like a distorted echo, or like a phonograph recording slowed down, so that the answering yelp was drawn out, and deeper.

Clem returned to the other end of the line. "That's it," he said breathlessly. "It can make sounds now. Don't know why it couldn't before. Unless maybe the things I fed it weren't big enough or smart enough to make it more like themselves, if you know what I mean. Now a Collie is a big animal and it's smart, so I guess Baby was able to make a better Collie than anything else. And that's not all. I got myself a young ape. Ought to be interestin' what she can do with that. What do you say now, Big Mike? I put a lot of money into this."

"All right," I said quickly, "I'll be down there in about an hour. Then we'll make the arrangements to get your pet into quarantine. But for heaven's sake, hold off on that ape, or you'll have the SPCA down on you. They don't care what you do to extra-terrestrial creatures, but they're death on cruelty to earth animals."

"Don't worry," he chuckled. "No one seen me bringin' these animals into my ship. Now hurry on down here, Mister Sill!"

I hurried. Clem really had an attraction now for my zoo. I could visualize the streams of visitors bringing their pets in and watching that plastic blob put on its imitations. I was not going to let a competitor latch on to it. I tore out of the office, stuffing a few hundreds into an envelope for a down payment and putting it in my pocket along with a blank contract form.

I landed the 'copter on the field as a blood-red sun was sinking down toward the western horizon. The old ship loomed up before me, blackened and blotched with corrosion, like something dead and in the first stage of decomposition.

The outer lock of the access hatch was open, and the dim light was on inside, so I stooped and went inside. It was very quiet, too much so. I could feel the prickling at the back of my neck start again. I moved forward cautiously toward the narrow passageway that led to the entrance to the cargo hold.

I called out tentatively: "Clem?"

There was no answer.

"Clem!" I called out, a little louder, my voice sounding hollow in the metal confines of the ship.

Silence.

I started to move forward again toward the dark manhole at the other end of the passage, and stopped short.

I heard a patter and a scraping, and then a strange chittering sound, like the faint chuckling of an asthmatic old man. I pressed my back against the cold steel wall in alarm as a small human-like shape bounded suddenly out of the hold and scampered toward me, half erect and half on all fours.

I sighed with relief as it came into the light and I saw that it was the young ape Clem had spoken about. I grabbed for it as it went by, but it snarled with mixed rage and fear and darted by me, out through the open lock and out onto the field. I wondered what they would think in the direction tower when they saw an ape bounding across the landing field.

I wiped the perspiration from my forehead and went on to the manhole leading down into the hold. The light was on.

"Clem?" I called out again. But there was no reply. I thought he might have been asleep, or maybe went out for a quick snack or a drink. I decided I would wait for him. I climbed down the iron rungs and stepped off onto the floor. I found the stool I had sat on two days before, and lighted a cigarette to pass the time while I waited for Clem.

My eyes travelled slowly around the dim room. A whimper pulled my attention to a far corner, and I could make out the form of the second Collie, crouched on its belly, tied to a stanchion. I went over to it to pet it, but the low, ominous growl made me think better of it. I returned to the stool.

I finished the cigarette, and then a second and a third. I looked at my wrist watch. Half an hour had gone by, and still no Clem. I got up my nerve and walked to the tank in the center of the hold, deciding to get a better look at what I was going to invest some ten thousand dollars in.

The damned thing was floating lazily in the dirty water, throbbing slowly and turning around slowly like it had the first time I saw it. It also looked considerably larger. Clem had certainly been stuffing it.

I drew back as it started to swim toward me, but then realized there was thick, reinforced glass between it and me, and stood my ground with gritted teeth. It surged up against the inside of the glass and rebounded slightly. I was startled now to see how much weight it had really put on. Then, while I stared, the huge blob of protoplasm, which now reached nearly to the lid of the tank, began to ripple and bubble. I wanted to turn and run, but stood riveted to the spot with horrified fascination.

The thought ran through my fevered mind: *What can it possibly be going to imitate? I am the only living creature near enough to the tank.*

Then it gave me the answer to my unspoken question. Oh, God! I still see it in my nightmares. And worse still, I hear it.

That abomination continued to bubble and swell until I thought it would never stop. Then the bumps began to merge together, as they had done before. Slowly, like something out of an opium smoker's nightmare, a face formed out of the shapeless mass, flowing like water, but getting more solid all the time.

Then I saw it clearly, beyond all doubt and forever beyond all possibility of forgetfulness. It was Clem's face, and Clem's head, and then the outlines of a neck and shoulder. It was so good that even the eyes had that pale, washed-out blue color of the original man.

I staggered back against the wall, upsetting the goldfish bowl with a crash, and the fish flopped on the floor in their death agony while I slumped to my knees and hid my face in my hands. I think I cried, after the initial shock of horror gave way to anguished pity for what happened to the old space rat.

I think I know what happened. Clem must have been crouched on the lid of the tank with the trapdoor open, at-

tempting to throw the young ape to his pet. It had been too strong for him, and in the struggle Clem fell victim instead. I wondered dully how long it had taken to—*digest* him. Then, later, when I had appeared on the scene, the hellish mimic had given its master performance: an imitation of a human being for the first time.

I finally pulled myself together. I knew what had to be done. I knew that cyanide was deadly to all protoplasm. In the zoo we kept special guns loaded with glass needles that burst inside the target, releasing deadly hydrocyanic acid.

Dragging myself up the ladder shakily, I left the ship, climbed into my 'copter and flew back to the office. It was dark now, and the office staff had gone home. I got my cyanide pistol out of the desk drawer, ran back to the helicopter and flew once more to the space port.

It was all I could do to force myself into the bowels of that dying old hulk and down again into the hold. The remaining live Collie had wrapped its rope around and around the stanchion, and crouched now on the floor, frothing at the mouth. In one corner, a small bird lay stiff on the floor of its cage, dead of fright.

The air in the hold was heavy and oppressive, like the atmosphere just before a thunderstorm. The great blob of protoplasm in the tank was featureless once more, but seemed to be internally agitated, as if for once it had swallowed more than it could digest, and small waves lapped against the glass walls of its prison.

Standing on the tips of my toes, I could see that my guess as to what had happened earlier was probably right, for the trapdoor stood ajar in the lid of the tank. I raised my arm over my head, pointing the pistol on a downward slant toward the opening, and fired. But the angle was impossible, and the first needle went wide of its mark. I realized I would have to get up closer.

Trembling violently in every limb, I forced myself to mount the step-ladder and crawl on my hands and knees across the top of the tank to the opening,

for a direct shot at the huge gray mass. I should have remembered what Clem had told me about its method of capturing prey.

With a speed incredible for that seemingly sluggish bulk, a long tentacle whipped up from the depths of the tank, dripping with foul water and slime, and lashed out at my wrist. I pulled back just in time, for only the tip of the pseudopod slapped wetly across the back of my wrist.

But that single caress burned like acid. I screamed with pain and rolled over to the outer edge of the lid and fell to the floor. I crawled over to the Collie's pan of water and dipped my burning wrist again and again. Then I heard a squishing, rubbery squeak and whirled around. Scrambling to my feet, I saw with a numbing shock that the thing was beginning to ooze up out of the tank and flow across the lid toward me.

I ran for the ladder in panic, but slipped on the corpse of a goldfish, and the agony of a broken ankle sent stabbing spears of fire into my brain. I tried to hop across the hold on my good foot, and was making fair progress, when I heard a sucking, slopping sound and looked back over my shoulder.

Almost the entire mass of the enormous ameba was now out of the tank and was starting to flow across the floor as if to cut off my escape. I screamed until there was blood in my throat.

I leaped for the ladder with a superhuman effort and made it, pulling myself up hand over hand and dragging my bad leg behind me. Somehow I had the presence of mind to hold the pistol between my teeth. Another tentacle lashed out from the living nightmare behind me, but missed. I finally made it to the top, wriggled through the manhole and lay on the gangway on my belly gasping for air.

My right hand and wrist now burned with such agony that I had to take the pistol in my left hand. Stopping the trembling by sheer effort of will, I aimed the cyanide pistol down and fired needle after needle into the churning gray mass below as it milled about in blind frustration.

And then I looked down into the deepest pit of hell.

Have you ever seen how a moth or a fly behaves when you spray it with insecticide? It becomes blindly phototropic. That is as the poison begins to work, its nervous system becomes deranged. The insect reverts to some basic instinct, flying again and again into the nearest light until it dies.

As the thing below me began to die, it blindly followed its primal instinct. One after another, in an insane kaleidoscope, form followed form across the upper surface of the heaving bulk: insects, fishes, birds; then mice and rabbits and other small animals, followed finally by the shape of the Collie.

Then, in its ultimate dying agony, the thing belched a huge bubble, and the head of Clem formed in the frothing, gelatinous mass, and shot up into the air on a long stalk, bobbing to and fro a mere foot below me. Then, from the writhing, twisting caricature of his face, the pale blue eyes looked up at me, and in a moment of madness I thought they recognized me and were trying to say something.

I screamed and hurled the empty pistol at the contorted, rubbery head. The pistol bounced off, covered with fermenting slime, and where it had struck, an opening appeared and a mouth formed, grinning idiotically I whimpered as the mouth gaped wider and the sounds came out. God help me!

First there came a sort of high-pitched whistling, quickly followed by a deep, gluey gurgling accompanied by brief gusts of fetid gases heavy with the odor of death and decay. Then the head made a final convulsive effort and half sang, half roared the sounds.

"essmm *AWRRR!* essmm *AWRRR!*" it belched, with an idiotic irrelevancy that made a mockery of life and death.

I tried to clap my hands over my ears, but too late to shut out that thick, glutinous bellow; too late not to know what it was trying to say—or sing. It was the first line of Clem's favorite ditty.

Then the head suddenly collapsed like a punctured balloon

and dropped back into the stinking, decomposing bulk, where pores as big as saucers opened and closed spasmodically, emitting puffs of vile fumes. I staggered to my feet and found my way out again into the clean, pure air of night.

BIG Mike Sill finished his story and sat with his eyes closed, his face a mask of anguish. I sat stunned and silent. Then Big Mike opened his eyes again, reached for my notebook silently, and signed it as he had promised. As he did so, I saw the mark on his wrist —a deep, raw furrow, as if the flesh had sloughed off at one time and never healed over completely.

After he signed my notebook, he began to press the green service button again and again, frantically. The waiter hurried in and set a glass and a bottle of whiskey in front of him and left. Mike Sill waved a hand at me in dismissal, then poured a straight shot with a trembling hand and tossed it off, then a second and a third. When he looked up again and saw that I was still there, he roared at me to get out and leave him alone.

I stood in the doorway for a moment watching him. He had forgotten me, and had begun to pound on the table with both fists, beating out the time crudely as he started to sing, in a hoarse voice,

"Bless 'em all, bless 'em all—"

I left the private booth hurriedly and closed the door behind me.

As for myself, I don't think I'll ever want to go to Venus.

THE END

LOOK TO THE STARS

by SCOTT NEVETS

Harvard University scientists have perfected a new amplifier which will extend the range of radio telescopes tenfold. The amplifier is known as a three-level solid state MASER. The core of the instrument is a single crystal of potassium cobalticyanide about the size of the first joint of a man's thumb. The name stands for Microwave Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation.

A radio telescope picks up radiation from hydrogen clouds in the galaxies of space. The MASER amplifies the range far beyond any reach now available, and should yield valuable data on the makeup of the distant stellar clusters now beyond range.

It functions at a temperature only two degrees above absolute zero, being kept cold by a bath of liquid helium. Amplification is gained by shifting electrons from level to level within the crystal. When an electron drops from one level to another, it radiates energy at a specific wave-length. But if radiation of that wavelength comes in from outside and strikes the electron at the lower level, it is thrown back upstairs.

Scientists can interpret the radio signals from outer space by measuring the amount of radiation caused by the level-shifting of the electrons.

A space satellite may be used to beam telecasts round-the-world in the future. Present-day television is limited by the reflecting power of the ionosphere, which bounces the waves back to Earth. A satellite in twenty-four hour orbit around Earth, remaining over the same point at all times, could be used to pick up television impulses and relay them to other areas of Earth or to other more distant satellites that can transmit them to other continents than the one of origin.

VAMPIRES FROM OUTER SPACE

by RICHARD F. WATSON

NOVELETTE *illustrated by* EMSH

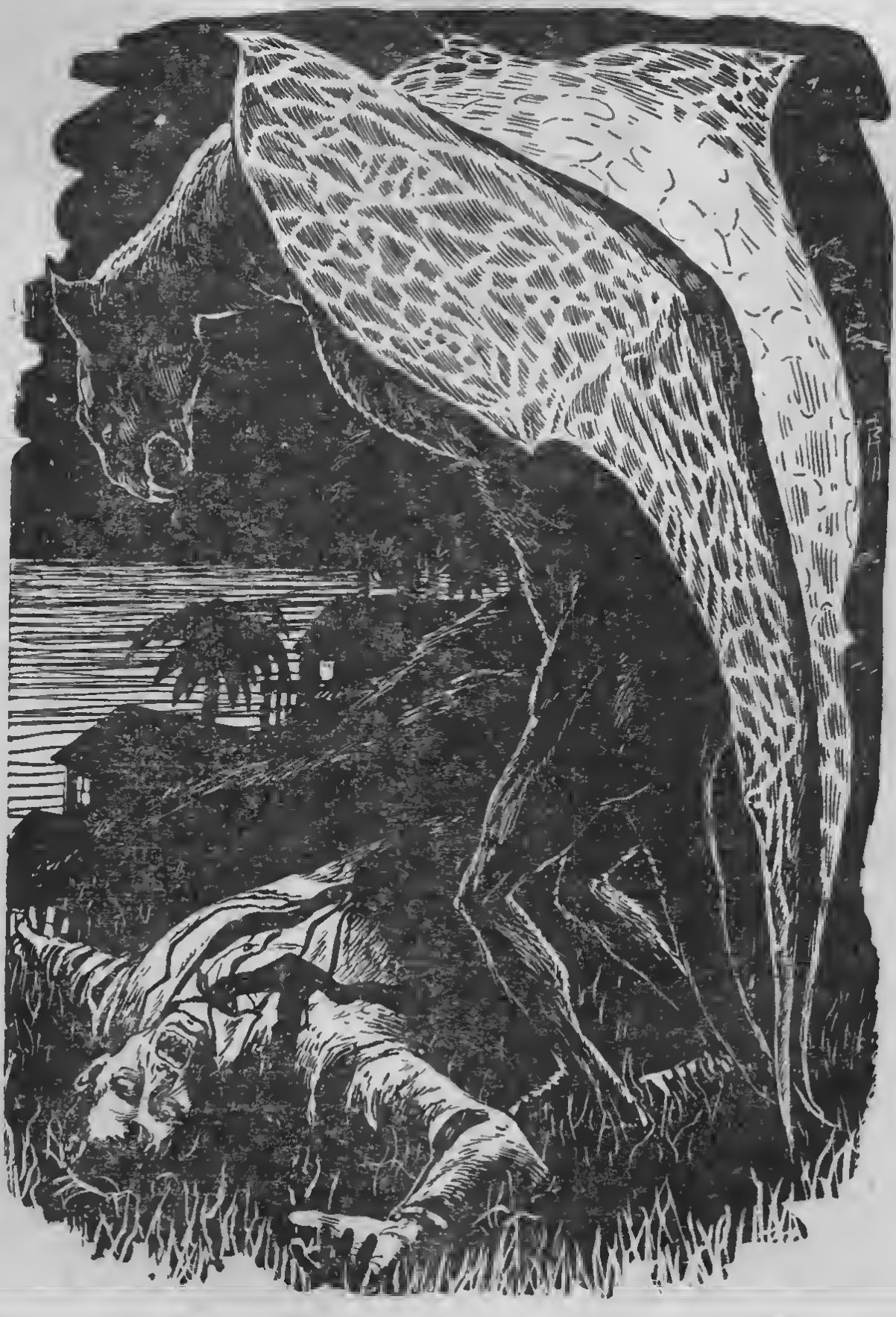
The weird seven-foot purple bats had come to Earth to stay. Terror ran wild over the land when rumors spread that they were vampires who killed to suck human blood

THE first report of what was quickly to become known as the Vampire Menace reached the central office of the Terran Security Agency half an hour after the attack had taken place. The date was June 11, 2104. Agency Subchief Neil Harriman was busy with routine matters when the courier burst into his office, carrying a message pellet gaudy with the red-and-yellow wrapping that meant Top Level Emergency.

Harriman reached one big hand out for the message pellet. "Where's it from?"

"San Francisco. It just came in by simultaneous visitape. Marked special for your office, with all the emergency labels."

"Okay," Harriman said. He flipped the switch that darkened the office and brought the viewing screen down from its niche in the ceiling. As Harriman unwrapped the message pellet and began to slip it into the viewer, he glanced up at the courier, who was standing by with expectant curiosity. Harriman scowled darkly. No words were necessary. The courier gulped, moistened his lips, and backed out of the of-



fice, his curiosity about the emergency message doomed to be unsatisfied.

Alone, Harriman nudged the starter button and the tape started to unwind past the photon-cell eye of the viewer. An image formed in glowing natural colors at the far side of the room.

The voice of the speaker said, "This is Special Agent Michaels reporting from San Francisco, chief. There was a killing out here twenty minutes ago. The local police sent for me because it looked like Agency business."

The screen showed one of San Francisco's steep hills. Some twenty feet from the camera's eye a body lay grotesquely sprawled, face downward, head toward the foot of the hill. Gray fog swirled over the scene. It was nearly noon at Harriman's New York office, but it was still quite early in the morning across the continent in California. Transmission of the message-tape was virtually instantaneous, thanks to progress in communications science.

Harriman watched patiently, wondering why it had been necessary to bring to his attention a routine West Coast murder. The image bounced as the man holding the camera walked toward the corpse.

Special Agent Michaels' voice said, "This is just the way he was found, twenty minutes ago."

A hand reached down and turned the cadaver over so its face was visible. An involuntary gasp broke from Harriman's lips. The dead man's face was the color of chalk. Harriman had never seen so pale a face before. The victim's eyes were open, and frozen in them was an image of pain, of shock, of horror beyond human comprehension.

There were two dark little holes an inch apart on the dead man's throat, just over the jugular.

"There isn't a drop of blood in him, chief," Michaels said quietly in commentary. "He's as dry as if he was pumped clean with a force-pump. We've identified him as Sam Barrett, a salesman in a used-car showroom. Unmarried, lived with his aged mother. He

worked around the corner on Van Ness Avenue. There were two eye-witnesses at the scene of the crime."

The camera's eye panned to a balding man in his forties who stood at the edge of the sidewalk, nervously twisting his hands together. He looked almost as pale as the ghastly body on the ground.

"Go on," prompted Michaels. "This is for the record. Tell us who you are and what you saw."

"My name is Mack Harkins," the balding man said in a thin, hesitant voice. "I live over on Austin Street, couple of blocks from here. Work at the Dynacar showroom around the corner. I was walking along and suddenly I looked up ahead and saw a man struggling with—well—some kind of *thing*."

"Describe it," Michaels prodded gently.

"Well—bigger than a man, purple-colored, with big bat-wings. You know, one of those bat-people, what do you call them?"

"Nirotans?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that's it. One of them Nirotans, bending over the man's throat like he was sucking blood from him. Before I knew what was going on, the bat-thing saw me and bolted away into an alley." Harkins shuddered. "I went to look at the body. No blood at all, just like he is now. Drained."

"You're sure it was a Nirotan you saw?" Michaels asked.

"I ain't sure of anything. But there was this big purple thing with bat-wings wrestling with poor Barrett. If it wasn't one of them Nirotans, I'd like to know what it was, then."

"Thank you, Mr. Harkins. I think the local authorities would like to ask you some questions now." The camera flashed toward the second witness.

The second witness was not human. He was a member of one of the half-dozen different species of alien beings that frequented Earth since the opening of the age of interstellar travel some three decades earlier.

The camera focussed on the short, stockily-built being whose only external physical

differences from humanity were the two tiny heat-sensitive antennae that sprouted just above each eye.

"You are from Drosk?" Michaels asked.

The alien nodded. "I am Blen Duworn, attache to the Drosk Trade Commission office in San Francisco," he said in smooth, faultless English. "I was out for a morning stroll when I came upon the scene this man has just described to you."

"Tell us what you saw."

"I saw a large winged entity vanishing into that alley. I saw a man falling toward the ground, and another man—Mr. Harkins—rushing toward him. That is all."

"And this large winged entity you saw—can you identify it more precisely?"

The alien frowned. "I am quite sure it was a Nirotan," he said after a brief pause.

"Thank you," Michaels said. The screen showed another view of the bloodless corpse. "That's where it stands as of now, chief. I'll keep in touch on further developments as they break. Awaiting your instructions."

The screen went dead.

IN his darkened office, Neil Harriman sat quietly with folded hands while a chill of terror rippled quickly through him. He recovered self-control with an effort, and switched on the light.

His mind refused to accept what the message tape had just told him.

Harriman's particular job in the workings of the Terran Security Agency was to deal with crimes involving Earthmen and aliens. There was plenty of bad blood between the people of Earth and the strange-looking visitors from space. A planet which had not yet fully reconciled itself even to racial differences in its own species of intelligent life could not easily adjust to the presence of bizarre life-forms, some of them considerably superior to the best that Earth had.

Up till now, Harriman's job had largely been to protect the aliens from the hostility of Earthmen. The green-skinned

Qafliks, for example, had touched off demonstrations in those parts of the world where white skin was still thought to be in some way superior to all other colors of skin.

In other places, the peculiar sexual mores of the uninhibited Zadoorans had angered certain puritanical Terrestrials.

So Harriman's wing of the Agency had been given the task of protecting Earth's many alien visitors until the people of Earth were mature enough to realize that it was not necessary to hate that which was strange.

But now an entirely new and dangerous aspect had entered the picture. One of the aliens had murdered an Earthman. And, thought Harriman bleakly, it *would* have to be a Nirotan that had committed the crime.

The Nirotans were recent additions to the Terran scene. They had first landed on Earth less than a year previously, and no more than a few thousand were present at this time. They were not pretty. Descended from a primitive batlike form, they were frightening in appearance—purple-hued creatures seven feet tall, their bodies covered with thick coarse fur, their eyes tiny and set deep in their skull, their faces weird and strange.

They had wings, bat-like membranes of skin stretched over vastly elongated finger-bones, while a small pair of well-equipped hands provided them with the manipulative abilities necessary for the development of a civilization.

They were traders, bringing with them curiously fashioned mechanical contrivances that were in great demand on Earth. But they had little contact with Earthmen. The Nirotans seemed to be a withdrawn, self-contained race, and few Earthmen cared for the company of such repellent-looking beings in any event.

So little was known about them. Dark rumors had arisen that they were vampire beings, thirsty for human blood. The ordinary people of Earth regarded the Nirotans with fear and loathing for this reason, and gave them a wide berth.

So far as anyone had known, the vampire story was nothing

but a terror-inspired myth.

The murder story, Harriman thought, would have to be hushed up somehow. At least until the investigation had definitely proven the guilt or innocence of the Nirotans. If the world ever learned of the "vampire" attack, there would be an hysterical uprising that might bring about the death of every Nirotan—or every alien of any kind—on Earth. Reprisal from the stars would be swift.

Harriman scowled tightly. This was too big for him to handle on his own. He restored the message tape to its container and picked up his phone.

"Harriman speaking. Let me talk to Director Russell. And fast."

His call went through rush channels, and a moment later the deep, resonant voice of the Director of the Terran Security Agency said, "Hello, Harriman. I was just about to call you anyway. I want to see you in a hurry. And I mean *hurry*."

DIRECTOR Russell was a short, rotund man who normally wore an affable expression during even the most grave crisis. But there was nothing cheerful about his plump face now. He nodded curtly to Harriman as the Subchief entered. Harriman saw two message pellets lying on Russell's desk, both of them wrapped in the red-and-yellow emergency trimmings.

Russell said, "I've been reading some of your mail, Harriman. You know that I'm always notified when an emergency message arrives here. You got one about half an hour ago. Then another one showed up for you, and I figured I'd save some time by having a look at it myself. And no sooner did I finish scanning that one when another one showed up." Russell tapped the two message pellets on his desk. "One of these is from Warsaw. The other is from London. They're both about the same thing."

"The Nirotans?"

Russell nodded darkly. "Tell me about your tape."

"A man was murdered in San Francisco this morning. Body found completely

drained of blood, with puncture-holes over the jugular. Two witnesses—a Drosk and a man named Harkins. They saw the victim struggling with something that looked like a Nirotan."

The Director's eyebrows rose. "Witnesses? That's more than we have on these other two."

"What are they?"

"Murder reports. One in Poland last night, the other in London about two hours ago. An old man and a girl, both bloodless."

"We'll have to keep this quiet," Harriman said. "If the people find out—"

"They have. There's already been a vampire-hunt in Warsaw. Two Nirotans were flushed by the mob and just barely escaped with their lives. Londoners are talking vampire too. It looks damned bad for the Nirotans, Harriman. Especially with this eye-witness thing in San Francisco. Everyone called the Nirotans vampires all along—and now there's something concrete to pin suspicions to."

"But they've been here for almost a year," Harriman protested. "Why should they suddenly break out in a wave of blood-drinking the same night?"

"Are you defending them?" Russell asked.

"I'm just speculating. We have no definite proof that they're guilty."

"Maybe," Russell said, "they just couldn't hold out any longer with all that nice fresh blood tempting them."

Harriman eyed his chief strangely. He knew Russell did not have much liking for the alien beings on Earth. The Director was, in many respects, an old-fashioned man.

"You aren't pre-judging the Nirotans, are you?" Harriman asked.

"Of course not. But it certainly looks bad for them. I've ordered all Nirotans taken into protective custody until things cool down a little."

"Good idea," Harriman agreed. "If some of them got lynched by the mobs we might find ourselves at war with Nirota tomorrow."

"I'm aware of that," Russell said. "Also, I'm having the

three bodies flown here for examination. And I want to get a live Nirotan to examine, too."

"That won't be so easy," Harriman said. "They don't like Eathmen peering at them up close."

"They'd *better* like it," Russell said. "Take a trip over to the Nirotan Consulate downtown and talk to the head man."

Harriman nodded. "Right. But I don't think they're going to cooperate."

THE news sheets picked up the story with almost supernatural speed. THREE VAMPIRE VICTIMS, screamed the headlines of the afternoon editions. BLOODLESS BODIES FOUND IN FRISCO, LONDON, WARSAW. NIROTANS SUSPECTED.

Harriman made an appointment to see the ranking member of the Nirotan Consulate at half past two that afternoon. Until that time, he busied himself with keeping up on news reports.

Angry mobs were beginning to form. A country-wide movement was under way in Poland, the object to hunt down any Nirotans that could be found and destroy them. Ancient superstitious legends had been reawakened in Central Europe. There was talk of silver bullets, of wooden stakes through the heart.

"Dracula-men from the stars," shouted a West Coast newspaper. In Los Angeles, crowds surrounded the Nirotan headquarters, climbing towering palms to hurl bricks at the windows. A major incident was brewing as news of the triple killings swept the world. Fear and hatred were turned against alien beings of all sorts. Harriman sent out a world-wide order instructing authorities everywhere to give sanctuary to aliens of any kind, in case the mob generalized its hate and struck out against all non-humans.

At two that afternoon the first body arrived—from London, flown over by transatlantic rocket. Harriman had a moment to view the corpse before heading downtown to the Nirotan Consulate.

The victim was a girl of about seventeen, with plain but pleasant features. The sheet was lifted from her body and Harriman saw its paper-whiteness, and the two dark little holes at her throat. Horror crept down his back. It was a ghastly sight, this bloodless body. The girl's mouth was locked in the configurations of a terrified scream. She looked like a waxen image, not like a creature of flesh and blood.

Harriman's special car was waiting for him outside the Agency building. He rode downtown in deep silence, his mind still gripped by the sight of those chalky young breasts, those dead white thighs. Despite himself he could picture the huge revolting form of the Nirotan huddling around her, its wings half unfolding as the gleaming teeth plunged through the soft flesh of the protesting girl's throat—

Harriman shook his head. He was an officer of the law, he reminded himself. An impartial investigator dedicated to justice. He had to keep from letting his emotions enter into the case. Maybe the Nirotans *were* hideous; maybe they *did* look like the Devil's own nightmares. It made no difference. His job was simply to determine guilt or innocence.

If the Nirotans were guilty, if three of their number had committed the crimes, then there would be grave interstellar repercussions. Probably the Nirotans would be asked to leave Earth permanently.

But if they were innocent—somehow—then it was his job to protect them from the wrath of the mobs, and find the real culprits.

The Nirotan Consulate was a sturdy four-story building on Fifth Avenue—an old building, dating back nearly two centuries. Just now it was surrounded by a boiling, screaming mob. Eight armed men in the gray uniforms of the Security Corps held the rioters back. The door, Harriman saw, was barred. One of the Security men had a cut over his left eye; the result, probably, of a thrown missile.

The crowd melted to one side as Harriman's official Security Corps car came to a

halt outside the building. Escorted by three armed Corpsmen, Harriman made his way up the steps of the building. He waited outside the door while a scanner beam examined him. There was the sound of relays groaning as the heavy protective bars were electronically drawn back.

The door opened. A Nirotan stood in the shadows within, looming high above Harriman.

"Enter," the alien said in its strange, hoarse, voice.

Harriman stepped inside and the great door clanged shut behind him, obliterating the raucous screams of the mob outside. Three Nirotans faced Harriman, the smallest of them better than a foot taller than he. They conducted him silently through the building to the office of the Nirotan consul.

There was a faintly musty odor about the place. Despite himself, Harriman felt a twinge of revulsion as he was ushered into the presence of Trinnin Nirot, ranking Nirotan diplomat in North America.

THE Nirotan was standing in one corner of the office—Nirotans never sat. His small, muscular arms were folded in a surprisingly human posture. The great sleek wings lay huddled on his shoulders. On Earth the atmosphere was too thin, the gravitational pull too strong, to make it possible for the Nirotans to fly. Their home world had a thicker atmosphere and lighter gravity, and there they soared on wings that measured fifteen feet from tip to tip.

Harriman tried to hide the irrational fear he experienced at the sight of the huge batlike creature. He stared at the face, covered, like the rest of the Nirotan's body, with fine purplish fur. He could see the dog-like snout, the tiny yellow eyes, the enormous fan-like ears, and, gleaming behind the Nirotan's thin lips, the teeth. Teeth that might, perhaps, be able to drain blood from an Earthman's throat.

Harriman said, "You understand why I am here, of course."

"I understand that there are rioters outside this building,

and that my people on this planet must take cover for fear of their lives," said the Nirotan crisply. Like most aliens on Earth, his command of the language was flawless. "More than that I do not understand. I am waiting for an explanation."

Harriman's jaws tightened. He felt awkward standing halfway across the room from the Nirotan; but there was no place to sit down, and the alien did not offer any sort of hospitality. Harriman fidgeted, crossing and uncrossing his arms. After a brief pause he said—quietly, since the Nirotans were extraordinarily sensitive to sound— "Last night and this morning three Earthmen were found dead in widely separated places, their bodies drained of blood. Many people believe that they were killed by members of your race."

The alien's facial expression was unreadable. "Why should they believe this? Why choose us as the killers, and not the Qafliks or the Zadoorans or some other race? There are many alien beings on this planet."

"There are two reasons for suspecting Nirotans," Harriman said. "The first is an ancient superstitious belief in vampires. Bats who drink human blood. The people of Nirota are closest in physical appearance to the popular image of the vampire."

"And the other reason?"

"The other reason," said Harriman, "is more pertinent. Two eye-witnesses in San Francisco said they saw a Nirotan in the process of attacking one of the victims."

The alien was silent for a long moment. Finally he said, "Tell me, Mr. Harriman: if you could, would you kill and eat me?"

Harriman was stunned. "Would I—kill and *eat* you?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes. Do you feel any inclination to feast on a roasted Nirotan?"

"Why—of course not. The idea's monstrous!"

"Exactly so," the Nirotan said calmly. "Let me assure you that a member of my race would no sooner drink the blood of an Earthman than an Earthman would dine on Niro-

tan flesh. Pardon me when I say that we find your physical appearance as repugnant as you seem to find ours. The whole concept of this crime is beyond our belief. We are not vampires. We do not feed on animal matter of any sort. The crime we are accused of could not possibly have been committed by a Nirotan."

Harriman silently regarded the alien, staring at the flashing teeth, needle-sharp, at the vicious little claws, at the folded, leathery, infinitely terrifying wings. Appearance seemed to belie the calm denial of guilt that Harriman had just heard.

The Earthman said, "It might be possible to determine guilt or innocence quickly. If you would lend us a member of your staff for examination—"

"No," came the curt, immediate response.

"But our physicians might be able to establish beyond doubt the impossibility of any —ah—vampirism. I can assure you that no harm would come—"

"No."

"But—"

"We do not tolerate any handling of our bodies by alien beings," said the Nirotan haughtily. "If you persist in accusing us of this incredible crime, we will be forced to withdraw from your planet. But we cannot and will not submit to any sort of examination of the sort you suggest, Mr. Harriman."

"Don't you see, though, it might clear your people at once, and—"

"You have heard my reply," the Nirotan said. He rustled his wings in an unfriendly gesture. "We have stated our innocence. I must take your refusal to believe my statement as a deeply wounding insult."

There was crackling silence in the room. This was an alien, Harriman reflected. On Nirota, perhaps, the idea of lying was not known. Or perhaps the Nirotan was a very subtle devil indeed. In any event, the interview was rapidly getting nowhere.

"Very well," Harriman said. "If your refusal is final—"

"It is."

"We'll have to proceed with our investigation as best we

can. For your own sake, I must ask you not to let any of your people venture out unprotected. We can't be responsible for the actions of hysterical mobs. And, naturally, we'll do everything in our power to discover the guilty parties. Your cooperation might have made things a little easier all around, of course."

"Good day, Mr. Harriman."

Harriman scowled. "For the sake of good relations between Earth and Nirota, I hope none of your people is responsible for this crime. But you can be sure that when we do find the murderers, they'll be fully punished under the laws of Earth. Good day, Trinnin Nirot."

HARRIMAN was shaking with repressed disgust as he made his way down the consulate steps, and into his car. The Nirotan stench seemed to cling to him, to hover in a cloud about him. And he knew the Nirotan's hideous face would plague his dreams for weeks to come.

He rode uptown, back to the skyscraper that housed the headquarters of the Terran Security Agency, in a bleak and bitter mood. For the ten years that he had held his job, he had devoted himself to protecting the alien beings on Earth, guarding them from the outcroppings of superstitious hatred that sometimes rose up to threaten them. And now, he could no longer defend the extra-terrestrials. Three vicious crimes had been committed. And Trinnin Nirot's cold refusal to permit investigation made it that much harder to believe in the innocence of the Nirotans. The vampire image was ingrained too deeply.

When he returned to his office, Harriman found a message instructing him to report to Director Russell at once. He found Russell in conference. In the Director's office were four men—George Zachary, Secretary-General of the United Nations; Henri Lamartine, Commissioner of Extra-terrestrial Relationships; Dr. David van Dyne, chief medical examiner of the Security Agency; and Paul Hennessey, Commissioner of Justice and Russell's immediate superior.

Director Russell said, "Well, Harriman? Did you see the Nirotans?"

"I saw Trinnin Nirot himself," Harriman said. "And I got nowhere."

"What do you mean, nowhere?"

"Trinnin Nirot categorically denies the possibility that any Nirotan might have committed the crimes. He says that Nirotans are vegetarians, and that the whole idea of their being vampires is beyond belief. But he won't let us have a look at any of his men to confirm it."

"We expected the denial," muttered Commissioner Hennessey. "But where do we go from here?"

"Isn't there any evidence on the bodies?" Harriman asked.

Dr. van Dyne said, "All three bodies are here, and I've examined them. All that can be definitely determined was that two needle-like instruments penetrated the jugular veins of the victims and rapidly withdrew their blood. The withdrawal might have been done with teeth, or it could have been done mechanically. Of course, if we could get hold of a Nirotan and examine his teeth, we could probably find out readily enough whether one of them actually committed the crime or not. If they're really vegetarians, they probably don't have the equipment for doing it."

"Are we trying to decide whether a Nirotan actually did it?" Director Russell asked in some surprise. "I thought that was all settled. There were witnesses, after all, for the San Francisco murder."

Commissioner Lamartine said, "Before we can start to take legal action against the Nirotans, we'll have to rule out all possibility that any other race might have done it—or that the crimes were committed by Earthmen."

Russell blinked. "Earthmen? Are you suggesting—"

The bearded little commissioner shook his head stubbornly. "We're dealing with a proud and stubborn race here, as Mr. Harriman can confirm. We can't simply accuse them of a crime like this without proof."

"Eyewitnesses consti-

tute some beginning of proof," Russell snapped.

Commissioner Hennessey held up a hand to cut short the dispute. "Please, gentlemen. I think Trinnin Nirot's refusal to permit examination of any Nirotans speaks for itself in the matter of guilt or innocence."

"I'm not so sure," Harriman put in. "They seem to have some kind of taboo against letting other species get too close to them."

"But certainly they'd be willing to let the taboo go by the boards for the sake of clearing themselves," Russell objected.

"Not necessarily," said Lamartine. "We're dealing with alien beings, remember. They don't see things the way we do."

"In any event," said Secretary-General Zachary, "we'll have to reach some solution in a hurry. There's rioting going on in every city where Nirotans are located. And the bitterness is starting to spread to take in other aliens, too. If we don't restore order in a hurry, we're going to find all the extra-terrestrials pulling out—and turning Earth into a backwater world considered not fit for civilized beings to visit."

Harriman stared at the five grim faces. These men, like himself, were shaken to the core by the notion that the beings from the stars might be blood-drinkers in fact as well as in appearance. And it was hard to believe in the innocence of the Nirotans.

The phone rang. Director Russell reached out with a plump hand and snatched the telephone nervously from its cradle. He listened for a moment, snapped some sort of reply, and slammed the instrument down again.

"Bad news," he said, his face becoming grimmer. "A mob broke into the building where the Nirotans were taking sanctuary in Budapest. Dragged three Nirotans out and killed them. Drove wooden stakes through their hearts."

Harriman felt chilled. Legends weighted with medieval dust were erupting into the neat, ordered world of the twenty-second century. Wood-

en stakes in Budapest! Ominous mutterings against the winged people—and three bloodless bodies lying in the morgue ten floors below.

"Heaven help us if the Nirotans are innocent," Secretary-General Zachary said tonelessly. "They'll never forgive us for today."

"I'll order triple protection," Russell said. "We don't want a massacre."

HYSTERIA was the order of the day on Earth in the next six hours. Three murders in themselves were not of any great importance; round the world each day, hundreds of human beings met violent deaths without causing a stir. But it was the manner of the deaths that dug deep into humanity. The killings struck subconscious fears, and brought to the surface the old myths.

It was dread of the unknown, dread of the people from the stars, that touched off the rioting round the world. The relative handful of Nirotans waited behind the walls of their shelters, waiting for the mobs to come bursting in.

The United Nations General Assembly, which had become the world government in fact as well as in name during the past seventy-five years, met in an extraordinary session that evening at U. N. Headquarters.

The purpose of the meeting was simply to vote additional appropriations for the protection of extra-terrestrial beings against mob violence—but during the session a delegate from the United States rose in wrath to demand the immediate withdrawal of what he termed the "Nirotan vampires" from Earth.

The resolution was declared out of order, and did not come to a vote. But it represented the sentiments of a great majority of Earth's nine billion people on that evening.

Harriman flew to San Francisco that evening aboard a midnight jetliner that made the journey in four hours. A waiting taxi took him to the downtown San Francisco offices of the Nirotan Trade Delegation, in the heart of the city on Market Street. The

summer fog shrouded everything in gloom.

Special Agent Michaels was waiting for him outside the heavily protected building. The agent's face was set tightly. Fifty or sixty people were parading wearily around the building, despite the lateness of the hour. They no longer seemed violent, but they carried hastily constructed placards which bore slogans like VAMPIRES MUST DIE! and NIROTANS GO HOME!

"Been any trouble with the pickets?" Harriman asked, indicating the mob.

"Not as much as earlier," Michaels said. "There were about five hundred people out here around nine o'clock, but they've all gone home except the diehards. They were parading the mother of the murdered man around the building and screaming for justice, but they didn't try to do any damage, at least."

Harriman nodded. "Good. Let's go in."

There were fifteen Nirotans standing inside. Michaels assured Harriman that the group included every Nirotan who had been in the San Francisco area in the past three days. If a Nirotan had been the murderer of Sam Barrett, then the murderer was in this room.

Harriman stared at the group. As always the facial expressions of the aliens defied interpretation. They seemed to be waiting for the disturbance to die down, so they could resume their normal way of life.

Conscious of their dread appearance, of his own insignificance, of the nauseous odor of fifteen Nirotans in one room, Harriman moistened his lips. A mental image came to him unexpectedly—the fifteen bat-like creatures surrounding him, throwing themselves on him with one accord, fastening their fangs in his throat and sucking away his life-blood. He winced involuntarily at the vividness of the picture.

Then he remembered that he was an officer of the law, and that these beings facing him were simply suspects in a murder case.

He said, "Early yesterday morning a man was killed in this city. I'm sure you all know *how* he was killed. I've

come here from New York to talk to you about the murder of Sam Barrett."

None of the aliens spoke. In the solemn silence Harriman continued. "Two witnesses claim they saw a Nirotan struggling with the murdered man in the street. If the witnesses are telling the truth, one of you in this room committed that crime."

"The witnesses are saying that which is not so," declared an immense Nirotan boomingly. "We have committed no crimes. The offense you charge us with is unthinkable in Nirotan eyes."

"I haven't charged you with anything," Harriman said. "The evidence implies that a Nirotan was responsible. For your sake and the sake of interstellar relations, I hope it isn't so. But my job is to find out who is responsible for the killings."

"We wish you luck. But you must look elsewhere."

Harriman shook his head. "My first step has to be to establish guilt or innocence in this room. As a beginning, suppose I ask each of you to account for your whereabouts at the time of the murder?"

"We will give no information," rumbled the Nirotan who seemed to be the spokesman

A stone wall again, Harriman thought gloomily. He said, "Don't you see that by refusing to answer questions or permit an examination, you naturally make yourselves look suspicious in humanity's eyes?"

"We have no concern with appearances. We did not commit the crime."

"On Earth we need proof of that. Your word isn't enough here."

"We will not submit to interrogation. We demand the right to leave this planet at once, in order to return to Nirota."

Harriman's eyes narrowed. "The Interstellar Trade Agreements prevent any suspected criminals from leaving Earth for their home world. You'll have to stay here until something definite is settled, one way or the other, on the murder."

"We will answer no questions," came the flat, positive, unshakeable reply.

Anger glimmered in Harriman's eyes. "All right, then. But you'll rot here until we decide to let you go! See how you like that!"

He turned and spun out of the room.

HE slept fitfully and uneasily on the return journey to New York. It was midmorning when the jetliner touched down at New York Jet Skyport, and it was noon by the time Harriman returned to his office at the Terran Security Agency. He felt deep frustration. There was no way for the investigation to proceed —not when the only suspects refused to defend themselves.

Earth couldn't accuse members of an alien species of murder on the basis of two early-morning eyewitnesses and a lot of circumstantial evidence rising out of old hysterical legends. It was always a risky business when one planet tried people of another world for crime—and in this case, the evidence was simply too thin for a solid indictment.

On the other hand, Earth clamored for a trial. The overwhelming mass of the people, utterly convinced that the Nirotans were vampires, stood ready to enforce justice themselves if the authorities lingered. Already, three Nirotans had died at the hands of the jeering mobs—an incident which would have serious consequences once the hysteria died down.

Director Russell growled a greeting at Harriman as the Agency subchief entered the office. It was obvious from Russell's harried expression and from the overflowing ashtrays that the Director had been up all night, keeping in touch with the crisis as it unfolded and as new complications developed.

"Well?" Russell demanded. "What's the word from San Francisco?"

"The word is nothing, chief," Harriman said tiredly. "The Nirotans clammed up completely. They insist that they're innocent, but beyond that they refuse to say anything. And they're demanding to be allowed to return to their home world now."

"I know. Trinnin Nirot

petitioned Secretary-General Zachary late last night to permit all Nirotans on Earth to withdraw."

"What did Zachary say?"

"He didn't—not yet. But he doesn't want to let the Nirotans go until we get to the bottom of this vampire business."

"Any word from anyplace else?"

"Not much that's hopeful," Russell said wearily with a tired shrug. "There are thirty Nirotans under surveillance in London, but they're not talking. And we have twenty cooped up in Warsaw. Zero there too. Right now we're busy protecting a couple of thousand of the bats. But how long can this keep up?"

"Couldn't we seize a Nirotan forcibly and examine him?" Harriman asked.

"I've thought of that. But the high brass says no. If we happen to be wrong, we'll have committed what the Nirotans are perfectly free to consider as an open act of war. And if we're right—if the Nirotans were lying—then we still have the problem of finding out *which* Nirotans did the actual killing."

"Maybe," Harriman said, "we ought to just let the bats clear off Earth, as they want to do. That'll solve all our problems."

"And bring up a million new ones. I would mean that any alien could come down here and commit crimes, and go away untouched if he simply denied his guilt. I wouldn't like to see a precedent like that get set. Uh-uh, Harriman. We have to find the killers, and we have to do it legally. Only I'm damned if I know how we're going to go about doing it."

WE have to find the killers, Harriman thought half an hour later, in the solitude of his own office. *And we have to do it legally.* Well, the first part of that was reasonable enough.

But how about the second, Harriman thought?

Legally they were powerless to continue the investigation. The forces of law and order were hopelessly stalled, while fear-crazy rioters demanded Nirotan blood in exchange for Terran.

The main problem, he thought, was whether or not a Nirotan—any Nirotan—had actually committed the atrocities. According to the Nirotans, such crimes were beyond their capacities even to imagine. Yet the heavy weight of popular belief—as well as the damning fact of the two San Francisco witnesses—lent validity to the notion of the Nirotans as blood-sucking vampires.

Medical examination of a Nirotan might settle the thing in one direction or another. If it could be proven that the Nirotans might possibly have committed such a crime, it would be reasonable to assume that they had. But, on the other hand, if the Nirotans had definitely not done it, Harriman would have to begin looking elsewhere for the authors of the atrocities.

If only the Nirotans would cooperate, he thought!

But some alien quirk, some incomprehensible pride of theirs, kept them from lowering themselves to take part in anything so humiliating to them as an official inquest. The Security Agency was stymied—officially. They were at an impasse which could not be surmounted.

How about unofficially, though?

Harriman moistened his lips. He had an idea. It was a gamble, that would be worth his job and his career if he lost. But it was worth taking, he decided firmly. Someone had to risk it.

Picking up the phone, he ordered his special car to be ready for him outside the building. Then, without leaving word with anyone of his intended destination or purpose, he quietly departed.

There were several dozen Nirotans cooped up at the consulate on Fifth Avenue. Any one of those Nirotans would do, for his purposes. The thing he had to remember was that he was in this on his own. He did not dare risk taking on an accomplice. His plan was too risky to share with another person.

The consulate was guarded by armed Security Corpsmen. And, unless there had been a slackening of public animosity, the building was probably

still surrounded by a howling mob.

It was. More than a thousand shouting New Yorkers clustered around the building, pressing close to the steps but not daring to approach for fear of the guns of the Security men. The mob, frustrated, kept up a low animal-like murmur beneath the hysteria of the shouts and curses it hurled forth.

Harriman ordered his driver to park his car several blocks north of the scene of the disturbance. The Agency subchief proceeded cautiously, on foot, making his way between the packed rows of angry demonstrators toward the consulate. He felt a dryness in his throat. He was gambling everything, now.

He needed a Nirotan—dead or alive, preferably alive. And there was only one way for him to get one, he knew.

He made his way up the steps of the consulate. The guards, recognizing him, gave way. Harriman called them together.

"I've got orders to bring a Nirotan out," he whispered. "Just one. They want him down at Headquarters. When I get him out, I want an armed convoy through this crowd—eight of you on each side of me, with drawn guns, in case anyone in the crowd tries to make trouble. All that understood?"

They nodded. Tension pounded in Harriman's chest. He was taking a tremendous risk, putting a Nirotan in front of the crowd in broad daylight. But there was no help for it. If he came at dead of night, when the mob had diminished, he would get no response from within. Nirotans slept the sleep of the dead at night—this much had been definitely established.

Harriman waited in the scanner beam while the Nirotans within examined him. At last, he heard the heavy door begin to clank open. Beady yellow Nirotan eyes stared at him from within.

"Yes? What do you want?"

"To talk," Harriman said. "Something new has come up that you must be told about."

The door widened a little to admit Harriman. But, instead

of stepping inside, he extended a hand and seized the wrist of the Nirotan. Harriman tugged. The Nirotan, for all his great height, had the light bones of a flying creature; besides, surprise was on Harriman's side. The astonished Nirotan came tumbling through the half open door before he knew what was happening.

A great shout went up from the mob at the sight of the bat-creature. Harriman felt a twinge of fear at the raucous roar of the crowd. The Nirotan was squirming, struggling to break Harriman's grasp. His wings riffled impotently.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the bat-creature indignantly.

"Just come with me, and don't struggle, and everything will be all right," Harriman said soothingly. He let the alien catch a glimpse of the tiny needle-blaster he held in his free hand. "We want to talk to you at headquarters. The crowd won't hurt you if you cooperate with me."

For an uneasy moment Harriman wondered if the alien might not prefer suicide to cooperation. But evidently the Nirotans' pride did not extend that far. Eyes blazing with fury but otherwise meek, the Nirotan allowed himself to be led down the consulate steps by Harriman.

"Keep back!" the Security Corpsmen shouted, gesturing with their weapons, as they formed an enflankment to protect Harriman and his captive. An ugly menacing buzz rose from the crowd; some began to jostle forward, evidently impelled by hotter heads behind them. But they gave way as the little convoy proceeded past.

The trip to the car seemed to take hours. Harriman was limp and sweat-soaked by the time he finally reached the vehicle and thrust the Nirotan in. There had not been a single overt act of violence on the part of the crowd. It was as if the actual sight of a Nirotan walking safely through their very midst had left them too stunned to react.

"This is an outrage," the Nirotan started to say, as the car pulled away. "I will protest this kidnapping and I—"

Smiling in relief, Harriman

took from his pocket the anesthetic capsule he had prepared, and crushed it under the Nirotan's snout. The bat-creature slumped instantly into unconsciousness and said no more.

SOME fifteen minutes later, a stretcher was borne into the headquarters of the Terran Security Agency. The form on the stretcher was totally swathed in wrappings, and it was impossible to detect what lay beneath. Harriman supervised delivery of the stretcher to the inner office of Security Corps Medical Examiner van Dyne.

Dr. van Dyne looked puzzled and more than a little irritated. "Would you mind telling me what all this mystery is about, Harriman?"

Harriman nodded agreeably. "Is your office absolutely security-tight?"

"Of course. What do you think—"

"Okay, then. I've brought you someone to examine. He's currently out with a double dose of anesthetrin, and I'll guarantee his complete cooperation for the next couple of hours, at least. Don't ask any questions about where or how I got him, Doc. Just examine him, and get in touch with me the instant you're finished."

Harriman reached forward and yanked the coverings off the figure on the stretcher. Even in sleep, the face of the Nirotan was hideous. Dr. van Dyne's jaw sagged in disbelief.

"My God! A Nirotan! Harriman, how did you—"

"I told you, Doc, don't ask any questions. He's here, that's all, and until the anesthetrin wears off he won't say a word. Look him over. Find out whether or not a Nirotan can be a vampire. Let me know the outcome—and don't breathe a syllable of this to anybody else, *anybody,* or it'll be worth your head and mine. Clear?"

The pudgy medico looked troubled by the obvious irregularity of the situation. But he remained silent for a moment, eyeing the slumbering Nirotan on the stretcher. Finally van Dyne said, "Okay. I've always wanted to have a close look at one of these fellows. And we

can get a lot of things settled this way."

Harriman smiled. "Thanks, Doc. Remember, you don't know anything. If there's any blame to be taken, let me be the one to take it. How soon will you have any information to give me?"

"That's hard to say. Suppose you stick around the building for a while. I'll phone you in—oh, say, an hour and a half."

"Right. I'll be waiting."

As Harriman walked toward the door of van Dyne's office, the medical examiner had already begun to select the equipment he planned to use in the examination.

BACK in his own office, Harriman dropped down wearily at his desk and ran tensely quivering hands through his hair. In ninety minutes, he would have the answers to some of the questions that were plaguing him about the Nirotans.

He had kidnapped a Nirotan in front of a raging mob. It had been bold, foolhardy—but necessary. Without a close look at one of the bat-creatures, it was impossible to take even the first steps toward solving the vampire mysteries.

Now, he needed information. He rang up the library circuit and requested everything they had on Nirota—immediately.

The tapes started arriving a few minutes later. Harriman sorted through them. The first ones were dry statistics on Terran-Nirotan trade over the past ten months. But at length Harriman came up with something that was more useful to him—a tape about Nirota itself.

The Nirotans are a proud, aloof people, Harriman read. *They do not welcome contact with other races except for the purpose of trade.*

Their historical records stretch back for nearly fifteen thousand Terran years. They have had space travel for ten thousand of those years. The Nirotan Federation extends over some thirteen worlds, all of them settled by Nirotan colonists many centuries previously.

The Nirotans are superb mechanical craftsmen and their

wares are prized throughout the galaxy. In general they do not take part in galactic disputes, preferring to remain above politics. However, the Nirotans have been engaged in fierce economic competition with the artisans of Drosk for the past thousand years, and several times during this period the rivalry has become so intense that it has erupted into brief but savage wars between Drosk and Nirota—

Harriman's reading was suddenly interrupted by the strident sound of the telephone. As he answered, his eye fell on the wall-clock, and he discovered with some surprise that he had been immersed in Nirotan history for rather more than an hour. Perhaps, he thought hopefully, van Dyne had completed his examination and was reporting on his findings!

"Harriman speaking."

"van Dyne here, Neil. I've just finished giving our specimen a good checkdown."

"Well?" Harriman demanded eagerly.

In a quiet voice said, "If a a Nirotan committed those murders, Neil, then I should have been a streetcleaner instead of a medic."

"What do you mean?"

"Item one, the Nirotan's two big front incisor teeth are wedge-shaped—triangular. The holes in the victims' throats were round. Item two is that the Nirotan's jaws aren't designed for biting—he'd have to be a contortionist or better, in order to get his teeth onto a human throat. And item three is that metabolically the Nirotans are as vegetarian as can be. Their bodies don't have any way of digesting animal matter, blood or meat. Human blood would be pure poison to them if they tried to swallow any. It would go down their gullet like a shot of acid."

"So they were telling the truth after all," Harriman said quietly. "And all they had to do was let us examine one of them for ten minutes, and we'd be able to issue a full exoneration!"

"They're aliens, Neil," said van Dyne. "They have their own ideas about pride. They just couldn't bring themselves to let an Earthman go poking around their bodies with instruments."

"You haven't done any harm to your patient, have you?"

"Lord, no!" van Dyne said. "I ran a complete external diagnosis on him. When he wakes up he won't even know I've touched him. By the way, what am I supposed to do with him when he wakes up?"

"Does he show any signs of coming out from under the anesthetrin yet?"

"He's beginning to show signs of coming around."

"Give him another jolt and put him back under," Harriman said. "Keep him hidden down at your place for a while, until I can figure out where to go next."

"You have any ideas? Now that we know definitely that the Nirotans didn't pull the vampire stunt, how are we going to find out who did?"

Harriman said, "That's a damned good question. I wish I had an equally good answer for it."

Then his eye fell to the tape of Nirotan history, still open at the place where he had been reading when interrupted by the telephone call.

He read: *However, the Nirotans have been engaged in fierce economic competition with the artisans of Drosk for the past thousand years, and several times during this period the rivalry has become so intense that it has erupted into brief but savage wars between Drosk and Nirota—*

"I've got a hunch," Harriman said. "It's pretty wild, but it's worth a try. Keep that Nirotan out of sight for the rest of the day. I'm going to make another trip to San Francisco."

THE San Francisco Security Corpsmen knew exactly where to find Blen Duworn, attache to the Drosk Trade Commission office. For one thing, all non-human beings were kept under informal surveillance during the emergency, for their own protection. For another, Blen Duworn was a material witness in the killing of Sam Barrett, and therefore was watched closely so he could be on hand in case authorities cared to question him again.

Which they did. Early in the day, after his night flight to

the West Coast, Neil Harriman was shown into a room with the Drosk and left alone. Blen Duworn was short, about five feet three, but sturdily built, with thick hips and immensely broad shoulders, indicating the higher gravitational pull of his home world.

The Drosk was, at least externally, human in every way except for the half-inch stubs above each eye that provided a sixth sense, that of sensitivity to heat-waves. Internally, of course, the Drosk was probably totally alien—but non-terrestrial beings were not in the habit of letting Terrans examine their interiors.

Harriman said affably, "I know you must be tired of it by now, Blen Duworn, but would you mind telling me just what you saw that morning?"

The Drosk's smile was equally affable. "To put it briefly, I saw a Nirotan killing an Earthman. The Nirotan had his fangs to the Earthman's throat and seemed to be drawing blood out of him."

Nodding, Harriman pretended to jot down notes. "You were not the first one on the scene?"

"No. The Earthman named Harkins was there first."

Harriman nodded again. "We of Earth know so little about the Nirotans, of course. We have some of their history, but none of their biology at all. They claim to be vegetarians, you know."

"They're lying. On their native worlds they raise animals simply to drink their blood."

Harriman lifted an eyebrow. "You mean they have a long history of—ah—vampirism?"

"They've been blood-drinkers for thousands of years. Luckily for us, Drosk blood doesn't attract them. Evidently Terran blood does."

"Evidently," Harriman agreed. In the same level, unexcited tone of voice he went on, "Would you mind telling me, now, just how you managed to convince Harkins that he saw a Nirotan draining blood from Barrett—when it was really you he saw?"

The antennae above Blen Duworn's cold eyes quivered. "On my world, Earthman, a statement like that is a mortal

insult that can be wiped out only by your death."

"We're not on your world now. We're on Earth. And I say that *you* killed Sam Barrett, not a Nirotan, and that you deluded Harkins into thinking it was a Nirotan he saw."

Duworn laughed contemptuously. "How preposterous! The Nirotans are known for their blood-drinking, while we of Drosk are civilized people. And you can yet accuse me of—"

"The Nirotans are vegetarians. Human blood is poison to them."

"You believe their lies?" Duworn asked bitterly.

Harriman shook his head. "It isn't a matter of belief. We've examined a Nirotan. We *know* they couldn't possibly have committed those murders."

"Examined a Nirotan?" Duworn repeated, amused. "How fantastic! A Nirotan wouldn't let himself be touched by Earthmen!"

"This one had no choice," Harriman said softly. "He was unconscious at the time. We gave him a thorough going-over and found out beyond question that the Nirotans have to be innocent."

"I don't believe it."

"Believe as you wish. But who might be interested in seeing the Nirotans blamed for such crimes? For thousands of years Drosk and Nirota have been rivals in the galaxy, trying to cut each other out of juicy trading spots. Here on Earth we've allowed both of you to come peddle your wares, in direct competition with each other.

"But Drosk didn't like that, did it? So an enterprising Drosk did some research into Terran folklore, and found out about the vampire legend—about the dreaded giant bats who drink human blood, and who happen to resemble the people of Nirota.

"And someone cooked up the idea of murdering a few Earthmen by draining out their blood, and letting us draw our own conclusions about who did it—knowing damned well that there would be an immediate public outcry against the Nirotans, and also knowing that the Nirotans were culturally

oriented against defending themselves.

"You figured we'd never find out that the Nirotans couldn't possibly have done it. But you didn't count on the chance that we might violate Nirotan privacy, drag one of them off to a medical laboratory, and see for ourselves."

Blen Duworn's muscular face remained impassive, but his tiny antennae were stiff and agitated. "You forget that there was an Earthman who *saw* the Nirotan drinking blood."

"We know the Nirotans *can't* drink human blood," returned Harriman sharply. "Therefore, Harkins was either lying, bribed, or not responsible for what he was saying. I rather think it was the last, Blen Duworn. That you manipulated his mind in such a way as to have him think he saw a Nirotan. And then that you gilded the lily by coming forth as a witness yourself—never dreaming that we'd be uncivilized enough to look at a Nirotan despite his wishes, and find out the truth."

Blen Duworn's eyes suddenly gleamed strangely, and the antennae above his eyes rose rigidly. "You're very clever, Earthman. You seem to have figured everything out quite neatly.

"Only—we of Drosk are not blood-drinkers ourselves; medical tests could easily prove that we are just as innocent as the Nirotans are. Why try to fix the blame on us? I've never been positive that I saw a Nirotan that morning; it was dark and foggy. If *I* was the vampire, how did I do the killing?"

"Drosk is noted for its mechanical skill," Harriman said. "It isn't hard to devise an instrument that can tap the jugular, pump out a few liters of blood, and immediately turn the blood to vapor and discharge it into the atmosphere. I'm sure you could create such a device the size of a signet ring, with Drosk's microminiaturizing techniques. Plunge it into the jugular, draw out the blood, dispose of it—who would be the wiser?"

"The Nirotans are equally clever at such contrivances," retorted the Drosk.

"Yes, they are. But what motive would they have for confirming the popular stereotype of themselves as vampires? No, Blen Duworn, you've exhausted all your arguments. I say that the so-called Vampire Menace was cooked up by Drosk conspirators, with an eye toward driving your Nirotan competition off Earth. And—"

The gleam in Blen Duworn's eyes grew more intense. Harriman tried to avert the alien's gaze, but the Drosk snapped, "Look at me, Earthman! At my eyes! You've been very clever! But you haven't counted on one thing, the Drosk hypnotic power, the power with which I persuaded Harkins that he had seen a Nirotan, the power which I will use now to obtain my freedom—"

Harriman rose, reeling dizzily, as the alien's mind lashed out at his own. It was impossible to look away, impossible to break the alien's hold—

Harriman began to sag. Suddenly the doors opened. Three Security Corpsmen rushed in, seizing Blen Duworn.

Harriman shook his head to clear it, and smiled faintly. "Thanks," he muttered. "If you'd waited another minute he would have had me. I hope you got every word down on tape."

AFTER that, the rest was simple. "Duworn cracked and gave us the name of his conspirators," Harriman reported the next day to Director Russell. "Half a dozen Drosk were in on it. The idea was to make it look as if the Nirotans were going vampire all over Terra."

"And if you hadn't illegally examined that bat-creature," Russell said, "We'd still be going around in circles. You ought to hear the apologies Secretary-General Zachary's been making to the Nirotans."

"Couldn't be helped, chief. Duworn and the others were banking on our lack of knowledge about the Nirotans. And they came close to succeeding. But what kind of an investigation can you conduct if you don't know anything about the suspects, even?"

Russell nodded. "You'll have to take a reprimand, Neil.

That's just for the record. But there'll be a promotion coming along right afterward, to take the sting out of it."

"Thanks, chief."

Secretary-General Zachary managed to convey Earth's apologies to the Nirotans for the recent indignities they had suffered, and the bat-beings decided to remain on Earth. Drosk, on the other hand, felt compelled to withdraw; it was decided that the six guilty conspirators would be taken back to their home world for punishment according to Drosk law, and all members of the species departed from Earth at once.

Neil Harriman received his promotion, and once again it was safe for the Nirotans to walk the streets of Earth. But, despite the well-publicized findings that the Nirotans were harmless vegetarians, and despite the confession of the Drosk, few Earthmen passed one of the hulking bat-like beings without a slight shiver of revulsion, and a thought for the ancient legends of the era of superstition, which had so shockingly come alive for a few days during the so-called Vampire Menace of 2104.

THE END

NUCLEAR NEWS

by STEVEN RORY

A group of Stanford University scientists have been able to measure one of the atom's basic components—the neutron, which is the uncharged particle found in atomic nuclei.

The neutron is so small that its average radius can best be described as "from six to eight times ten to the minus fourteen centimeters." This means that if neutrons could be lined up in a row, it would take 10,000,000,000,000 of them to reach one inch.

The research group had previously measured the proton and found it also to be about one ten-trillionth of an inch in size. The work of the Stanford team shed new light on the form, as well as the size, of the atomic particles. They found that instead of being super-microscopic round units with clear-cut surfaces, the particles appear actually to be tiny clouds, dense in the core, and gradually thinning out.

Another finding was that atomic nuclei themselves do not always have a perfectly spherical shape. In some cases, it was discovered, the nucleus might take the shape of a football or a pear.

Among the wealth of scientific information yielded so far by the Soviet space satellites is the fact that the atmosphere 140 miles above the Earth is much denser than had previously been thought.

The upper atmosphere at that height is "five times denser than might have been supposed from studies made with rockets," said Dr. Fred L. Whipple, director of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory. The drag of the atmosphere is the force that slows space satellites and brings them toward Earth, where they meet eventual destruction in thicker atmosphere. The new discovery will affect future satellite-raising plans of both countries, since in order to insure a long life for any satellite it must be placed beyond the dense part of the atmosphere.

THE HUGE AND HIDEOUS BEASTS

by JAMES ROSENQUEST

The big beasts were terrible and deadly. But even more terrible, even more deadly was the fearful reason that explained the way they existed on that strange planet

"UP periscope!" With a twinkle in his calm, grey eyes, Commander Forrester gave the customary order as the good spaceship *Wanderer* 'surfaced' at another planetary shoal in the shoreless expanse of galactic space—a carryover from the old days when he had commanded one of America's atomic-powered submarines. When the first of the great globular ships had been built and declared ready for the starways, he had been the natural selection for its skipper.

"Aye, sir," responded Lieutenant Muller crisply, with the faintest of smiles, and pressed the green button in the wall of the command room. With a barely audible whirring, a great disk of alloy metal slid aside in the curved wall, exposing the window of foot-thick special glass. The bright yellow light of the planet's distant sun flooded into the ship.

The ship's assembled crew crowded forward—and gasped. The initial surprise gave way to a muted babble of voices as the highly-trained crew began to exchange technical comments and opinions.

"Another surprise for the log, eh Commander?" Lieutenant Muller murmured to his chief. The Old Man nodded



thoughtfully, stroking his chin.

The ship stood in the middle of a clearing that had been selected for the landing—about an acre of pebbly soil, slightly concave and very smooth, like a shallow amphitheatre or the dried-out bed of an artificial lake. Off to the right were some high, rounded hills—or perhaps they were the stumps of amputated mountains, incredibly old, worn featureless and smooth by vast eons of time.

Otherwise, nothing but the plants.

Vegetable monsters, reaching toward the livid sky like green skyscrapers, planted firmly in the black soil on stalks as thick as an earthly redwood tree and tapering off, some two hundred feet up, into asparagus-like tops surmounted by an umbrella of immense, fleshly leaves.

They were immediately dubbed "asparagus" by the crew, with the frowning exception of Hopkins, the botanist. But even he could not deny their succulent appearance, as if they were good enough to eat. Some one suggested garnering a few for the next meal's vegetable course, and there was laughter all around.

"Many a truth is spoken in jest," said a quiet voice pontifically, and the slight form of Kim Lee, the pharmacist, elbowed through the crew, almond eyes narrowed with thought.

Muller laid a friendly hand on his frail shoulder when he finally reached the porthole and raised himself on his toes for a better look.

"Now, now, Lee," the Lieutenant joked, "don't try to pre-empt my specialty. If anybody around here is going to get psychic impressions, I will!"

The little Oriental smiled modestly and shrugged his shoulders. "True enough," he admitted, "You've been trained in ESP. I haven't. But I have noticed something. I wonder if any one else has."

Muller put his hands on his hips. "What now, supersleuth," he asked good-naturedly, alluding to the pharmacist's hobby of twentieth century detective fiction.

Kim Lee continued didac-

tically: "Look straight ahead into that over-sized asparagus, then fan your eyes slowly to the right and then to the left."

Muller complied in good humor, not knowing what to expect. After a few seconds he grunted in surprise. He then yielded to the Old Man, who stepped forward and followed the same procedure, squinting his pale grey eyes against the glare.

He turned around and looked down at Kim Lee from his six-feet-plus, his face serious. "I see what you mean. At first sight that forest of asparagus has the random appearance of a grass lawn. When you look closer, those monster vegetables seem to fall into a pattern, like an orange grove, in more or less straight rows. Is that what you had in mind?"

Kim Lee nodded somberly. One by one, the other crew members pressed close to the window and followed the same scanning procedure, the initial murmurs of disbelief slowing dying out. The botanist, Hopkins, put the final seal of acceptance on Kim Lee's theory.

"Gentlemen," he said reluctantly, "I have to agree. The arrangement of the plants —they cannot be called trees —is, if I may pun, irregularly regular." His face colored slightly as he added: "Almost as if they had been planted..." His eyes widened in astonishment at his own suggestion.

Silence fell over the crew.

That night, several members of the crew tossed and rolled on their cots, not sure whether they had heard or merely dreamed it: a far-off trumpeting, like the challenge of a bull elephant, but muffled, as if the sound were damped by miles of strangely succulent plants. The combination of that great sound with the suggestion of distance aroused stirrings of troubled imagination that were quickly thrust out of mind.

In his own cubicle, Lieutenant Muller rolled over suddenly and sat upright on the edge of his cot. He groped toward the table in the ensuing echoless silence, found his cigarettes in the dark, and lighted one. He regarded the glowing,

orange-red tip in the black-velvet darkness, coaxing his mind into the receptive hypnoidal state.

At last the impression came, and he groaned to himself: "Oh, no!"

He could not get back to sleep the rest of that night.

THE day after planet-fall dawned with deceptively cheerful brightness. The planet's atmosphere was exceptionally clear and cloudless, and there seemed to be no elevations other than the effete hills to the right of the inspection porthole, so that the great yellow sun came up, almost literally, like thunder.

The big, globular ship was a beehive of activity, as the various crew members prepared for preliminary explorations. Lieutenant Muller sat alone with the Commander in the conference room, and related the event of the night before, and his own—as yet formless—impressions of the new planet.

Commander Forrester ran one strong, gnarled hand through a stubble of grey hair. "Between you and Kim Lee," he grunted, "you have the exploration party preparing for the first sortie as if they were going to a funeral."

"I know," admitted Muller, with a worried frown.

The Old Man lighted his ancient pipe—a real antique from the early twentieth century—and veiled himself behind clouds of fragrant blue smoke.

He continued: "On top of Kim Lee's discovery yesterday and your intuition of last night, you issued instructions that the exploring party must carry a portable atomic cannon! As if the flare-guns were not enough to reduce a full-grown elephant to a well-done meat patty!" He shook his grizzled head and sighed. "Well, you must know what you are doing. You were certainly right in the beta-Centauri incident."

Muller replied somberly: "I would have given anything to be wrong. We lost a good man in Moroney, although Doctor Wiley is doing a good job of filling in for him."

There was a knock on the

open door. The Commander looked up. "Come in, Prentice."

The ship's balding, middle-aged chemist stepped over the high sill and approached Forrester, waving a strip of paper tape punched with round holes.

"Here it is, Chief," he crowed, "another planet with good, breathable air for red-blooded mammals like us!"

The Old Man waved away the tape impatiently. "You know I can't read that inverted Braille. Tick it off for me."

Prentice scanned the perforated strip with considerable satisfaction. "Oxygen content slightly above terrestrial level—but this will just give the crew a little added pep. Carbon dioxide level also higher than on earth—will only make them breathe deeper."

He looked toward Lieutenant Muller. "Warn them against over-oxygenation. If they begin to feel a little lightheaded, they must make a conscious effort to control their rate of respiration. Aside from that, there are satisfactory levels of nitrogen and other inert gases. Temperature range and humidity quite comfortable. Ultra-violet and infra-red radiation from that yellow giant are within the safe range."

Commander Forrester knocked the dottle from his pipe and shook his head. "I never cease to be amazed by the automatic analyzer. By the by, does Wiley have his report ready yet?"

"He asked me to give it to you, sir. The bacterial content of the soil and air is—nil."

The Commander leaned forward in his chair. *"Nil?"*

The chemist nodded.

Muller looked at his chief significantly. "This is a complete reversal of all our past experience. Wherever we found life at all, there have always been micro-organisms."

Forrester shifted his big frame uneasily in his chair. "Too artificial," he muttered. "Still, so much the better for us. No chance of contracting something as horrible as the Venus rot." He filled his pipe again slowly. "This is not the first time I have wished we could stow a helicopter on

board, and eliminate the necessity for exploration on foot."

He struck the table decisively with his palm. "Go ahead, Fred. Take over. It's all yours now."

Lieutenant Muller stood up, saluted quickly, and left the command room.

The exploration party was ready: six men, including Muller, complete with testing equipment, pith helmets, flare guns—and the portable atomic cannon, loaded for firing. The lieutenant pressed the button in the wall and a section moved outward, settling slowly down until the far end touched lightly on the pebbly ground and came to a halt. He raised his hand informally and stepped out on the ramp, followed by the rest of the party.

The air smelled clean and good, and somewhat invigorating, and the temperature was in the eighties, but there was not a man who did not look longingly back at the great, cool, protective cave that was the *Wanderer*.

The absolute quiet was broken only by the crunching of the pebbles under foot. There might have been the barest, rubbery rustling of the great, fleshy leaves, as if the gigantic vegetables were discussing the intruders among themselves.

As they climbed the slight grade of the clearing toward the nearest rim, Muller surveyed it again briefly, struck by the saucer-like uniformity of the acre-wide depression. He turned to the biologist to comment on it, but stopped with his mouth open.

The ground had trembled slightly underfoot.

Muller looked at Polya, the geologist, with a worried frown. "Earthquake?"

The geologist shook his head. "Not likely. When the ship made its preliminary circling of the planet, there were no signs of volcanic formations. Nothing but low hills. This hunk of matter is old—very old." He added disgustedly, "This is not a geologist's dream. Not an interesting formation."

At last they stood on the rim of the saucer. Several hundred yards behind lay the

protection of the ship. Ahead was the endless forest of 'asparagus.' As they approached, they realized that the growths were farther apart than had been apparent from the ship—perhaps several hundred feet. The regular spacing was also very obvious now.

They stopped at the enormous base of one of the green towers while the botanist wielded a small power-saw to cut out a section of stalk. He examined the slice under a microscope, muttering under his breath. Finally he looked up.

"Most curious," he announced. "The cellular structure is coarse and large, but simple and very regular. There seems to be a high fat and protein content, similar to the soya bean."

Lieutenant Muller interposes casually: "Almost as if somebody with a fancy biological erector set had put the things together?"

The botanist snorted. "Who dreamed that up—you or Kim Lee?"

The Lieutenant smiled—but he was not at all amused. His feeling of uneasiness had grown suddenly stronger...

AN hour later, they came to the first body of water they had seen so far.

The stream was a hundred yards across. The banks on either side were slightly irregular, but the water flowed slowly and smoothtly—and straight as an arrow, from east to west.

Muller threw down the gauntlet. "Now," he challenged, "let some one step forward and tell me that this is a natural river bed." There were no takers.

Three rubber rafts were inflated with bottles of compressed air, and they crossed the shallow water in pairs, Muller sharing the leading raft with the geologist. They left the three rafts inflated on the bank, ready for instant re-use if needed.

Muller took a compass bearing and they struck due south, a course facilitated by the straight lane between rows of giant plants. Despite the rapidly rising yellow sun, the party made its way deeper into

heavy shade, cast by the almost solid umbrella of huge leaves almost two hundred feet overhead.

The excited babble first indulged in by the party—like small boys whistling past a graveyard—had gradually died out, giving way to silent boredom and then to plain depression, as repeated stops and samplings of the soil revealed nothing of interest. The unending ranks of towering plant monsters blended into a solid wall of green at a distance of about a thousand yards, effectively screening off land formations, if there were any. The ground was uniformly level and composed of rich black soil, making the absence of other plant life all the more extraordinary.

It was during the third hour that Lieutenant Muller raised his hand silently in the halt signal, and lifted his face as if sniffing the air. A faint breeze had sprung up.

"Does any one else get that odor?"

There was an answering chorus of sniffs. The biologist spoke first.

"You're right, Fred. A sort of acrid smell, like a cross between the lion house and the reptile pits at the zoo."

Muller rapped out tensely: "Flare guns out and at ready position! I think we're about to contact the first animal life on this phoney planet."

THE blast of sound was like the combined scream of a dozen express trains bearing down on them, trapped like a stalled motor vehicle on a grade crossing. They clapped their hands to their ears and staggered like drunken men. After a few seconds they removed their hands cautiously. The sound had died away, but their ear-drums still ached. The acrid scent had been replaced by an overwhelmingly fetid, hot breath of air, as if a great beast had opened its maw and breathed in their faces.

The ground trembled again.

The ear-shattering scream was repeated.

"My God!" some one gasped.

They stood almost on tiptoe, straining every muscle,

searching with feverish eyes in the general direction of the sound.

Then, without further warning, a mere half mile away, the green wall wavered like grass in the wind, and trembled, and parted like flimsy bamboo curtain.

And then it was upon them. with a speed that paralyzed, and a hugeness that froze the limbs.

Screaming its rage and hatred, it bore down, a mountain that moved. It was behemoth and leviathan rolled into one, all the monsters of fact and fancy rolled into one, composed of equal parts of madness and delirium.

And where it crashed unheeding against the sides of the towering plants, they swayed and shuddered to their roots, and their tossing branches clawed frantically at the lurid sky.

Lieutenant Muller was the first to recover his wits.

"Flare guns ready," he shouted through the pandemonium. *"FLARE GUNS READY!...FIRE!"*

It was to their eternal credit that not a man broke ranks. They stood in a straight line, shoulder to shoulder, their super-charged blasters aimed at the horror that shambled by day.

They fired in unison.

The air sparkled and crackled, and the thundering monstrosity was momentarily obscured in a cloud of blue fire.

The ragged cloud of protonic flame cleared away. The beast had come to a confused halt, stunned and blinded and injured.

But it was injured...not dead. The incredibly tough hide around the reptilian head and shoulders was charred and smoking, and steam rose from blood-oozing fissures in its living armor.

But it was not dead... It screamed again, pain mingled now with the hatred and fury, and the six tremendous stumps of legs began to move again, carrying the mountain of flesh toward them once more across the quaking ground. It extended the flat, ugly head toward them on the elongated neck of a brontosaurus and hissed like a thousand serpents. The

tiny eyes had been scorched and blinded by the blast, but it still lumbered forward, guided by the scent of the group of puny interlopers.

It was too close to use the atomic cannon, whose small, controlled fire-ball would still be too close for the safety of the group. Muller shouted a command again, his throat raw with the effort. A second blast from six guns enveloped the beast in blue fire, and under its temporary cover the little party turned and ran in the direction of the stream and the rubber rafts. The earth quivered beneath their flying feet, and they knew they were being followed by the living nightmare.

Muller looked back over his shoulder and gasped to his nearest companion: "We'll never make it!"

They were a few hundred yards from the river when Muller made a rapid mental inventory and realized that he had only *four* companions—instead of five...

He looked back. The botanist had staggered and fallen to his hands and knees, the behemoth a bare hundred yards behind them. Somehow, Muller made his voice heard above the din and brought the other members of the party to a stop. They raised their flare guns, but it was too late, even if the creature had not been so close as to make the botanist's inclusion in the blast almost inevitable.

They watched, sick and shaken to the depths of their souls as it dipped the great reptilian head and snapped up the screaming botanist like a fowl pecking at an insect. The rows of jagged teeth came together with an audible clash, and the frail human screaming stopped. Some one became violently ill as one severed leg dropped to the ground from between the grinding jaws.

There was no longer need for hesitation. While the monster was momentarily distracted by the strange new morsel of food in its gore-dripping maw, the remainder of the party retreated to a safe distance and raised the small atomic cannon. Like the 'bazooka' of the twentieth century wars, it spat out its rocket.

They closed their eyes until they heard the blast and felt the concussion. When they opened them again, they saw the miniature mushroom-cloud rising rapidly toward the tree-tops. They made their way to the shattered bulk on trembling legs, horrified and grief-stricken. No trace remained of Hopkins.

The head had been blasted from the colossal body, and lay five hundred yards away. The enormous hulk still quivered with the tattered remnants of tenacious life, and the hindmost pair of the six tree-stump legs twitched spasmodically.

Muller circled the smoking hillock of flesh dully, taking measurements and making observations almost mechanically, then produced a camera and took pictures from several angles. He repeated the procedure with the severed head. When he was finished he gestured silently, with infinite weariness, and the survivors followed him mutely to the river's edge and into the waiting life-rafts, and finally back to the sanctuary of the *Wanderer*.

AN hour later, after the five survivors had relaxed and thrown off much of the shock under a stiff dose of Pacificol, the newest tranquilizer, the ship rose five hundred feet and floated southward like a toy balloon on a vagrant current of air. Requiring minutes where the trip by foot had taken the party three hours, the *Wanderer* soon hovered over the spot where a man and a monster had both met violent ends. The rest of the crew turned pale to their lips at the sight of the still-smoking corpse televised on the command room's wall-screen.

Still a few miles further south from the scene of the gruesome tragedy, the viewers were staggered by the sight of an entire *herd* of the leviathans wallowing in an enormous swamp and basking in the warmth of the sun. Several of the hell-beasts were tearing huge hunks from the stalks of the 'trees' almost halfway up. One giant plant, gnawed at from two sides, crashed down

with the impact of a felled redwood, and was at once attacked by several ravenous beasts; who tore at the fleshy delicacy of the soft tip and its crown of immense leaves.

Several of the crew were all for destroying the six-footed nightmares with the ship's atomic armament. Commander Forrester was willing to do so until, acting on an indefinite hunch, Muller dissuaded him.

The Lieutenant sat now over the customary chess game with Kim Lee while they waited on dinner. With a murmured "sorry" the little Oriental took Muller's remaining rook with one of his knights. The Lieutenant swept the pieces to the floor with one ham-like fist and stood up suddenly.

Kim Lee stooped down and began to gather up the pieces placidly, as if it were a normal, daily occurrence. His square-jawed face turning red to the roots of his hair, Muller joined the pharmacist on the floor and assisted him in garnering the carved wooden pieces.

"No wonder you Orientals look like twenty years old when you're twice that age," he grumbled. "You never seem to let anything bother you." Then he added gruffly: "Sorry, Lee. Really I am."

"Tut, and again tut," replied the pharmacist lightly, "you needed the outlet. The catharsis did you good."

They resumed their seats over the empty board, but Lee sensed the officer's mood, and delicately replaced the pieces in their box. "Let's just talk. No more chess today."

Muller grunted assent, then pounded softly but insistently on the table's edge. "It's my fault," he groaned. "My fault and mine alone that Hopkins is lying now in the gut of that god-awful monstrosity. There wouldn't even be anything left to put together for a decent burial." He buried his face in his hands.

Kim Lee coughed discreetly. "Confucius said," he broke in softly, "that thought is the best antidote for emotion."

Muller looked up suspiciously. "I don't recall ever reading that."

Lee shrugged deprecatingly.

"One of his less-known sayings." His dark, almond eyes narrowed in thought. "Let us pass the time with a little deduction," he added, and smiled as Muller sat up with interest.

"First, we have the regular spacing of the 'asparagus' plants, like trees in an orange grove. Your expedition confirmed this arrangement. Second, they comprise the only vegetation on the planet, so far as we can determine. Third, the stream of water you crossed, which is so straight and regular as to suggest an artificial irrigation ditch rather than a natural river. Fourth, the complete absence of bacterial life—an absolute, biological impossibility. Fifth—the presence of a herd of these beasts in a convenient swamp. And, by the way, whoever called it a herd used a singularly pregnant word."

Muller's jaw dropped. "I had the same impression, but did not pigeon-hole the facts as neatly as you just have. What you are getting at—?"

"Exactly," Kim Lee nodded solemnly, "the beasts constitute somebody's—or *something's*—food supply, like a herd of domesticated cattle, although they seem far from tame."

Muller gnawed at his fingernails, his intense blue eyes squinting with worried thought. At last: "Fine, so far. But if these mountains of muscle and armor, by stretching imagination, are the food supply, then who are the—*master race?* And where do they keep themselves?

"Our aerial surveys of the planet have revealed absolutely no artificial structures, or anything that could be regarded as dwellings. And any race that could breed and use these creatures as a source of food would have no reason, for example, to live underground. They should have an immense, surface civilization covering most of the planet's surface, with the exception of the 'groves' of vegetables and the breeding grounds for the herds. Yes? No?"

Kim Lee's smooth yellow brow furrowed slightly. "That objection I readily concede," he murmured. "Yet what other

explanation can there be? The whole planet is artificial to an extreme—'phoney,' as you put it so succinctly."

He looked across at the officer, but the latter seemed to be lost in thought and unaware of the pharmacist's last remark. His eyes had the faraway, dreamy look that Lee had come to recognize and respect—the look of one whose natural ESP faculty had been trained and sharpened in one of mother Earth's experimental parapsych centers.

The pharmacist remained silent until the Lieutenant 'returned' of his own accord—until the staring eyes pulled back from immense distances and converged to present time and place, and focussed on him again.

Muller was pale but firm-jawed, like one who has arrived at an unpalatable conclusion, but was nonetheless determined to follow it to its ultimate consequences. The rugged face at last broke into one of its rare smiles that gave him an almost boyish look. Reaching out, he took Lee's frail, blue-veined hand in his own and pumped it until the slightly-built pharmacist thought his arm would detach at the shoulder.

"Intuition and deduction!" the Lieutenant exclaimed, chuckling. "The two of us make an unbeatable combination!"

He stood up, tall and massive in the small private cubicle. "Kim Lee, my lad," he crowed, "you left something out in your excellent enumeration of the facts—and I think I have it!"

"The sixth and final point, that explains everything!"

THEY sat in the command room on either side of the Old Man, Kim Lee somewhat diffidently, Muller confidently. The fourth member of the conference sat on the other side of Muller: the astronomer and astrophysicist, Professor Newman. From an array of charts and photographs spread out before him on the table, he selected one photo and handed it to the second-in-command.

"This is an electronic telescope enlargement of the plan-

et's satellite. A dead body like our own moon, but half its size and only some hundred thousand miles from the parent body. It therefore completes its cycle in about ten of Garganta's days. By the way, if there are no objections, I have christened this planet Garganta, with obvious reference to the huge size of its two life-forms: plant and animal."

Muller grunted non-committally and took the photo that the astronomer offered him. Commander Forrester leaned forward to get a closer look.

"Just another worn-out, airless satellite," he commented through luish clouds of tobacco smoke, "like so many we have encountered—which is why I did not bother to give the order to land on it." He looked at his aide anxiously. "Was that w r o n g, Fred? Could this be it?"

Muller studied the dreary craters and vast 'seas' of fine pumice powder, and shook his head slowly. "No," he replied grimly, "I'm pretty sure it isn't—and it would have been a sorry day for us if it was, and we had landed—and what I suspect is true!"

He handed the photo back to the astronomer. "What's next, Professor?"

The astrophsicist handed him another picture, one of a small, cloudy disk strongly resembling Terra's veiled neighbor, Venus. "A strange parrallel," remarked Newman. "The planet we are now on—Garganta—is the third from this system's sun. This body," he added, tapping the glossy print with a long finger, "is next closest to the star, and seems to be perpetually veiled in mist or clouds of some sort, like Venus. It is impossible to penetrate this barrier with the electron telescope and observe the surface. I really wish we could—"

Muller broke in, speaking heavily. "Sorry, Professor, I don't think we may ever get closer than we are to it right now..." He added suddenly: "How close is it at the present time?"

Newman thought briefly. "About thirty million miles. Come to think of it, it's approaching perigee with Gar-

ganta now—that is, coming as close to it as it ever will for about ten years..."

Muller snapped his fingers and stood up, and the other three men were shocked to see the expression of fear on that craggy face. "Commander," he said tensely, "please issue this order at once, for God's sake. If I am right, it is of the utmost urgency." He whirled on Kim Lee. "Lee, do you have a good recollection of the televised viewing of that herd today?"

Commander Forrester broke in: "I can have the film re-run for you, if you like—"

Muller waved his hand with unconscious brusqueness. "Well, Lee?"

"As I recall," said the little Oriental slowly, "there seemed to be only two sizes of beasts: either mountain-size, apparently the fully grown adults; or just hill-size, probably the infants— Heaven protect us! As a matter of fact, I also recall great, white, semi-spherical objects lying about on the swamp, like so many egg-shells."

The Lieutenant rapped the table excitedly. "Exactly! A crop of babies has been hatched recently. Being reptilian, the beasts are on their own from birth. They are not dependent on the parents for food, like mammals. And this means that the parents, fully grown, are now ready for the slaughter!"

He swung about, facing the Commander again, and ground out: "I implore you, sir, give the order to the Chief Engineer. We must get off Garganta—*AT ONCE!*"

THE *Wanderer* hung motionless in space, a million miles out. Relatively motionless, for it had to match the velocity of Garganta in its orbit in order to remain at the same distance. Against the black infinity of space, its non-reflecting outer shell would have been indetectable to any observer not specifically looking for it, and not knowing its approximate position. And Muller was most emphatic that it must lie on the *far* side of the planet—not between it and its veiled sis-

ter. And this was well for them, indeed...

After forty-eight hours, Muller was striding up and down in the command room, while the Old Man watched him with patient amusement and the barest glimmering of doubt. "Sit down, Fred. You'll wear a hole right through the floor and find yourself in the outer shell."

Muller did not reply to his superior, but kept glancing at the screen that covered one entire wall, and on which the electronic telescope enlarger cast an image of the acre-wide, pebbly saucer that had been the ship's berth so recently.

By the thirty-sixth hour after leaving Garganta, Muller was cursing his intuition and Kim Lee's deductions. "But it's got to be right!" he shouted, and struck the table a blow that made even the placid Commander start, and cough over his pipe.

"Now, now Fred—"

Professor Newman hurried in, his ascetic face chalk-white and his lips compressed to hairline thinness. "You were right, Lieutenant, you were right!" he said, with undertones of incredulity and fear, and handed over a sheaf of glossy photos numbered consecutively, his hands trembling.

Muller studied them silently, handed them to his chief without a word. A small, luminous dot, spark-like, could be seen detaching itself from the parent body of the veiled planet. And in each successive photograph the tiny spark was farther away from the main disk, as if hurled outward at enormous velocity.

LATE afternoon was casting shadows over the still, silent face of Garganta when the *"Others"* landed, settling their titanic spheroid gently as thistledown, until it rested in the great concave landing area it had used so many times before, its enormous, curved bottom filling the saucer-like depression from rim to rim.

It was like a small moon, or a large asteroid. It was the end of inter-planetary transports, and the beginnings of an artificial planetoid. It was

an engineer's dream, but an explorer's nightmare.

And then a vast section of the hull opened out and settled down as a ramp, the far end touching lightly at the very edge of the monstrous forest, like a stupendous mockery of the *Wanderer's* own earlier procedure. Somebody stifled a scream. Perhaps it was the astronomer. No matter.

Through the vast, yawning port and down the tremendous ramp half-crawled, half-stamped the Scouts, followed by the Herdsmen and then the Butchers, wearing complex devices and weapons attached at the thinner portions where each segment of the long, scabrous body was attached to the next segment.

The innumerable pairs of 'feet' were sheathed in something like metallic shoes. And the heads... The eyes unwinking and many-faceted, like an insect's... The giant maws, held shut with grotesque primness...

It was to Kim Lee's credit, at this point, that he had suggested removing the evidence of the 'crime' before the *Wanderer* had fled to safety in the womb of galactic space. So it was that the carcass of the beast had been removed from the forest of plant giants, borne aloft on an extension of the spaceship's anti-grav field, and deposited in the nearby hills and buried under tons of earth.

As it was, the Others followed almost the exact route of the exploration party, and so on to the breeding grounds, where they descended with utter ruthlessness on their herd, killing many of the adults with their unknown weapons and *carrying* them off on their backs, while others were driven, trumpeting with terror, into the interior of the cargo ship. A few adults were left behind with the young of the herd: the larder, evidently, was filled.

Night was sweeping over that side of Garganta when the herding and slaughtering was finally done. The scouts and the Herdsmen and the Butchers disappeared into the depths of their metallic asteroid. The ramp swung upward

and closed and became a part of the vast, seamless hull. Gently as thistledown borne on a vagrant breeze, the great globe rose into the air, arced out into space, and dwindled rapidly as it hurtled toward its shrouded parent planet.

"OF course," said Muller smugly, "the sixth point was the curved depression we berthed in when we landed on Garganta. If everything else on the planet was artificial, that had to be, too. Its very appearance should have been the tip-off at the very start. The curved surface was absolutely much too smooth and regular.

"But the mind simply refused to acknowledge that there existed a space vehicle big enough to make that indentation. Or that there were beings large enough to handle it." He pushed a pawn deep into Kim Lee's center.

The pharmacist studied the move. "Wiley, our esteemed biologist," he said, "seems to think that we may have unwittingly contributed to the extinction of a great race. He believes that the masters created the artificial environment on Garganta, completely freeing it of all bacterial life, so that their herds could grow big and strong."

The Lieutenant nodded. "It makes sense. We add anti-biotics to the feed of our own fowl and cattle to make them grow bigger and healthier. Now, I suppose Wiley means, we have contaminated the planet with the micro-organisms that humans always carry around in abundance. Come to think of it, our parting view of Garganta, after the masters left, showed some of the adult beasts going around in circles and others lying on their sides as though they were sick."

"And, of course," added Kim Lee, moving a piece, "the masters will probably contract something before they realize what has happened. No doubt they have not experienced infection for countless ages. Sad, in a way, for they must be highly intelligent. Yet —who knows? Perhaps they might have felt like star-wandering some day, and stumbled

onto poor little Terra!"

Muller replied to his opponent's last move. The pharmacist moved again, removing the Lieutenant's remaining rook with one of his knights.

The officer groaned, then: "Oh well, he who trips twice over the same stone deserves to break his shins, as the ancient proverb goes."

Kim Lee squinted suspiciously. "By Confucius?"

The Lieutenant grinned broadly. "No—by Robert Muller!"

The *Wanderer* plunged into hyperspace, literally vanishing from sight—had there been any one to observe in the great emptiness—and began the long journey home.

THE END

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A CRY FOR HELP

by ERIC RODMAN

The strange beings on World 9, System XG could enter into a man's brain at will and make certain changes in the cells, changes to suit their ruthless purpose

"LISTEN," Walters said. "There it is again. You can just barely make it out, above all the other noise of the forest. Hear it?"

His three fellow-members of the Terran Exploratory Force stopped in their tracks and cocked their ears for the sound Walters had claimed to hear.

"There!" Walters cried. "That was it!"

"Probably just some alien baboon howling in the trees," Buckmaster said in a thick, scornful voice.

"I'm not so sure," Stivens put in. "Walters may have been right."

"But it's impossible!" Buckmaster retorted. "A human voice out here on an unexplored alien world, crying for help? Be reasonable, man! How—"

"Quiet!" O'Dell snapped. "Here it comes again!"

The four Earthmen fell silent. The wind changed slightly, blowing in toward them, and, borne on the wind, came the sound that Walters had said he had heard.

It was a high-pitched cry, drifting on the wind. It was louder now than it had been before. And this time there was no mistaking the identity of the sounds that floated on the wind.

They were words. Terran words.

Someone on this unexplored alien world was screaming for help.

"Well?" Walters asked tri-

umphantly. "*Now* do you believe me, Buckmaster?"

The biggest of the four Earthmen was shaking his head in stunned disbelief. "It can't be," Buckmaster muttered. "How could there be an Earthman out here? We're the first, aren't we?"

"Someone's making that sound, though," O'Dell said. "Impossible or not."

"Someone?" Stivens asked. "Or *something?*"

Walters whirled. "What are you trying to say?"

Stivens shrugged. "Just wondering. We're liable to find anything at all on an alien world that's previously unexplored. But it's a lot more likely that we'll find an alien life-form capable of imitating human speech than that we'll discover a castaway Earthman in a part of space where no Earthman's ever been before."

"You think it's an alien being making that sound, then?" Walters asked.

Stivens said, "I'm not making any guesses about something I have no information on."

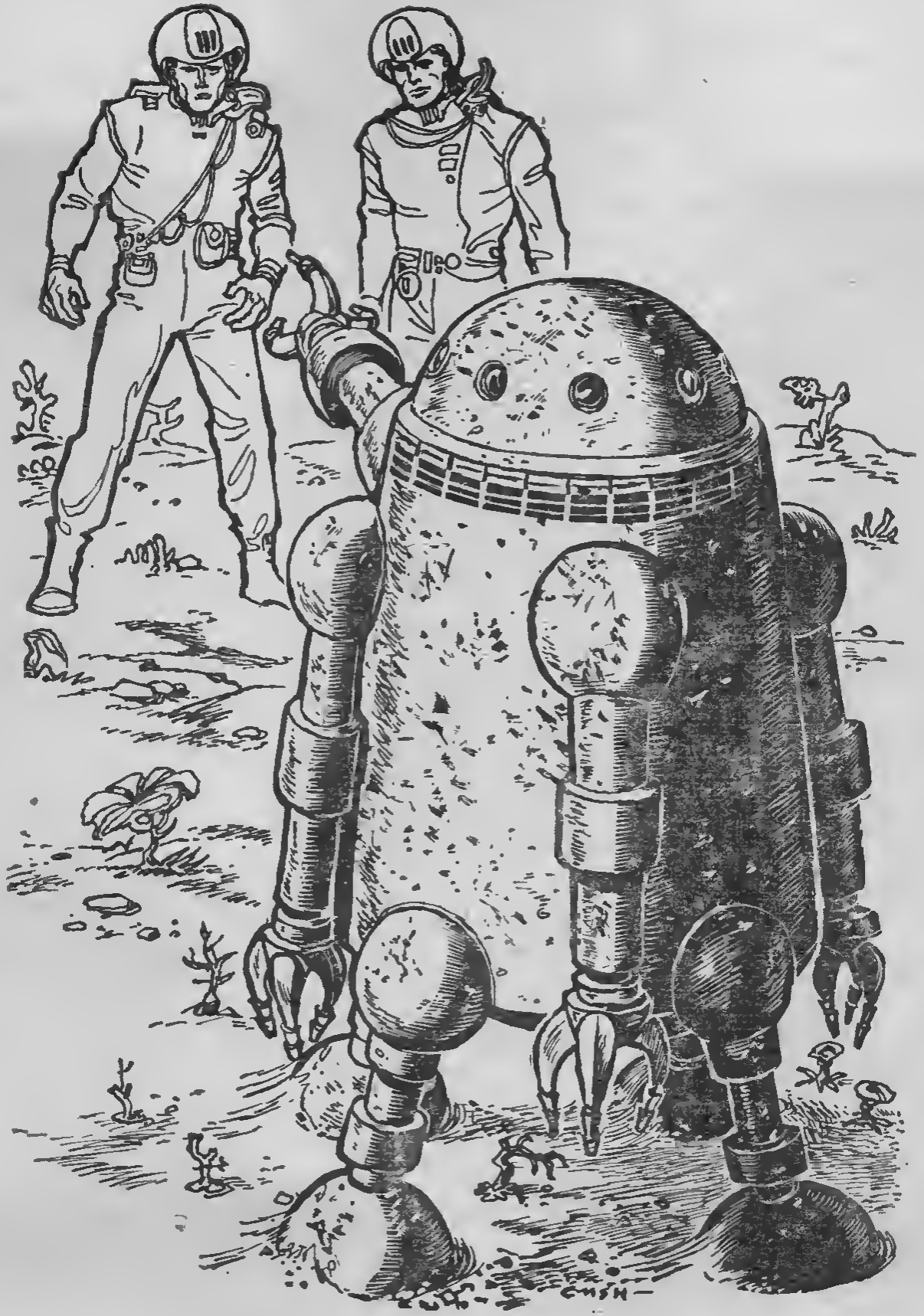
"We ought to go investigate," O'Dell said quietly.

At that moment the sound came again. There was no doubt about it, this time. It was an undeniably human voice, crying, "Help me! Please—help me!"

THE quartet of Exploratory Force men moved forward uneasily, away from their ship and toward the point of origin of the sound, a couple of hundred yards away in the forest. The bright yellow sun climbed to its noontime height above them. The forest was warm; the men perspired heavily. Small birds cheeped at them from the oddly angular limbs of the gaunt trees that made up the forest; insects sang shrilly inches from their feet.

A voice crying for help in the forest. On the face of it, it was impossible.

The planet was designated on the charts of Terran Central Command only as World 9 of System XG. It was a small, moderately Earthtype world many thousands of light-years from Earth. According to the records of Central Command, no Earthman



had set foot on World 9 of System XG before the arrival of this four-man exploratory team.

No Earthman had set foot here. But yet someone—or *something*—was crying for help in the forest.

Tree-shadows slanted before them as they walked. The forest floor was soft with the decayed remnants of undisturbed centuries of fallen leaves. No one spoke. Every few minutes the strange cry was repeated: "Help me? Won't you help me?"

The cry grew louder as they approached.

O'Dell said, "We'd better be careful. This may be some kind of trap."

"Trap?" Walters said. "What do you mean, *trap?*"

"I don't know," O'Dell said. "I just think we ought to be careful."

"It *has* to be a trick," Buckmaster said. "There couldn't be another human being out here on this planet. Not twenty thousand light-years from Earth."

They moved forward cautiously. All four of them had been in the Exploratory Force long enough to know that you had to move with step-by-step care when exploring a new world.

You never knew when the ground would give way beneath your feet, sucking you down into a trap where a lurking flesh-eating creature waited. You never could tell when sinewy tentacles would descend from a tree and haul you up to become some beast's meal. You never could be prepared against the sudden spring of a jungle animal with legs like coiled steel.

All you could do, on these alien worlds, was to take one step at a time, look north, east, south, west, up, and down all simultaneously, and trust to your luck.

Especially the last. It took luck to survive as a member of the Exploratory Force.

Stivens had survived sixteen years of active duty. O'Dell and Buckmaster were each twelve-year men. Walters, the youngest of the outfit, was an eight-year veteran himself. This was no green and inexperienced crew that had been

sent forth to World 9 of System XG.

"Help me!" wailed the pitiful voice.

"It's not far from us now," Stivens said. "No more than twenty yards."

They peered through the thick curtain of closely intertwined shrubbery, looking. Almost unconsciously, four hands crept to four hips, and blasters appeared.

They fanned out.

"Here I am!" the voice called. It was an unmistakably Terran voice. "Over here!"

The Exploratory Force men exchanged worried glances. Then, quietly, they converged on the clump of shrubbery which lay between them and the unseen speaker.

Buckmaster was the first to get there.

"Help me!" cried the familiar voice.

Buckmaster gasped heavily. "What—what are you?"

A moment later the other three were there. Stivens whistled in amazement. Walters nibbled his lip. O'Dell frowned.

"It isn't from Earth, that's for sure," Buckmaster said. "But how did it learn to speak our language so well? And in the voice of an Earthman?"

"And what *is* it?" Walters asked.

THE thing, whatever it was, stood on four stubby legs. It was about five feet tall, tapering conically up from its four legs and terminating in a round dome. Big saucer-like eyes ringed its head about six inches from the top of the dome. The eyes, which were the size of silver dollars, were arranged in a circle clear around the creature's head, giving it a complete three hundred sixty degree sweep of vision.

It had four arms, likewise arranged in a circle around the body. The arms ended in long triple-jointed fingers. There was no mouth, only a kind of grillwork equidistant between eyes and arms.

The creature was greenish in color. There was an appearance of tremendous age about it, as if its thick, leathery hide had been exposed to the ele-

ments for hundreds or perhaps thousands of years.

Stivens said, "Is *this* the thing that was making all the noise?"

"I called to you, yes," the creature said gravely. Its voice emerged from the grillwork affair above its arms. It spoke in tones and inflections that were Earthlike to the last decimal place.

"I'll be damned," O'Dell said quietly. "It speaks Terran like a native."

They stared at the strange being for a long moment without speaking. The silence was broken by the creature itself.

"You are natives of a planet called Earth," it said in a flat, declarative voice. "Earth is the third planet in orbit round a yellow sun which you know as Sol. Is this true?"

"Yes, of course," stammered O'Dell. "But—"

The creature continued smoothly, "You are known in your native areas by the designations Walters, Buckmaster, Stivens, and O'Dell." The being nodded in turn to each of the dumbstruck Earthmen. "Please confirm the accuracy of these designations."

"Sure, they're our names," Buckmaster growled. "Look here, just what *are* you, and—"

"Your purpose in visiting this planet, which you designate as World 9 of System XG, is to establish Terran claim here. The ultimate aim of Earth is to explore and colonize the entire known universe. Is this not your purpose?"

"It is," Stivens snapped. "And now, suppose you answer a few questions for *us*. First: are you a native of this planet? Second: how do you manage to speak our language so well? Third—"

The alien being interrupted in a smooth, almost purring voice. "It is not my function to answer questions, but merely to gather information and relay it to the appropriate data-gathering centers."

"You yelled for help," Walters said sharply. "But you don't seem to be in any trouble. Were you yelling like that simply as a ruse, to attract our attention?"

"I repeat," the being said. "My function is not to answer questions."

"You asked us plenty!" Buckmaster stormed.

"My function is to gather data and relay it."

"Relay it to *whom?*" Stivens asked.

"To those who built me," said the alien creature.

"To those who *built* it," O'Dell repeated in a softly wondering voice. "So it's a robot? A robot sitting here in the middle of an uncharted jungle on an uninhabited world, and a robot capable of speaking our language—even of crying for help—!"

"What's it doing here?" Walters asked, of nobody in particular. "What does it want?"

"It gathers data," Stivens said. "But what kind of data? And who does it gather it for?"

The robot stood quietly in the middle of the group, a short, blunt-topped, bizarre-looking figure that studied them emotionlessly with its big eyes.

Blandly the robot said, "I am now authorized to reveal certain information to you. Please remain exactly where you are." The robot paused. "I am an information-gathering device built and installed by intelligent life-forms of a distant world, who have placed me here for the purpose of detection and warning in case of visitation by other intelligent life-forms—"

Stivens said hurriedly, "Quick! Back to the ship! Don't stand here listening any more!"

He turned and began to run rapidly through the underbrush toward their ship, whose greenish-gold hull glowed in the sunlight several hundred yards away. After a moment's hesitation he was followed by O'Dell, then by Buckmaster and Walters.

The robot called to them: "Flight will be futile! You are wasting your energies!"

STIVENS was the first to reach the ship. At least, he got close to the ship. Ten feet from the catwalk that led into the control cockpit, he ran into what seemed like an in-

visible wall. He bounced back five feet and lost his balance, tumbling backward with arms and legs flailing in all directions.

O'Dell and Walters, who were not far behind him, caught the falling Stivens and steadied him into an upright position.

"What's the matter?" Walters asked.

The panting Stivens nursed his bruised nose with one hand and pointed toward the ship with the other. "Some kind of force-field surrounding the ship—invisible—I banged into it full tilt."

Buckmaster, who had come lumbering up to the ship a distant fourth in the run, tiptoed forward and placed one hand cautiously outward, groping toward the ship. The hand halted in mid-air.

"Here it is," Buckmaster said. "A solid wall, all right. It feels like glass. Smooth, cool to the touch, just like glass."

He knelt and ran his hand down along a curved path toward the ground. He picked up a stick lying nearby, gouged a couple of inches of dirt out of the forest floor, and prodded experimentally into the hole he had just created. He shook his head.

"Goes right down into the ground," Buckmaster reported. He stretched up as high as he could reach. And up, too."

"It extends all the way around the ship," said Walters. "It's like an invisible dome that somebody dropped right over the ship. A dome of force. Keeping us from getting into the ship."

Four pale, frightened Earthmen turned to stare at each other in wonderment. What had started with the mysterious cry for help in the forest now had abruptly turned into a completely inexplicable and dangerous situation.

"What's going on?" Buckmaster wanted to know. "Where did that crazy robot come from, anyway? And what does that force-field around our ship mean?"

"The force-field," said a smooth voice from behind them, "is present for obvious reasons." The men turned and saw that the weird robot had

followed them back to their ship, and now stood ten or fifteen feet behind them, eyeing them gravely. "The purpose of the force-field is to prevent you from leaving this planet until my masters arrive. But I can assure you that their arrival will take place in a matter of seconds."

"Get your blasters ready," Stivens said in a quiet voice. "Let's get into a tight formation. Back to back, facing in all directions. But don't shoot until you have to. We're a scouting team, not a military expeditionary force."

The four men edged close to each other, forming a circle no more than a dozen feet in circumference. They waited with drawn blasters. Not far away stood the robot, staring at them with no hint of expression on its alien face.

Suddenly an odd glimmering effect became noticeable in a wide area surrounding the men, the ship, and the robot. Four hands tightened on four trigger-studs.

And then, four blasters dropped to the forest floor, falling from hands unable to control their own actions. The men stared at their weapons without being able to stoop and pick them up.

The aliens arrived.

There were eight of them. They simply seemed to pop out of nowhere. One moment there was a curious glimmering light in the clearing, the next moment the glimmering was gone and eight aliens stood there.

They looked very much like the robot. They stood the same height, had the same number of eyes and limbs. In place of the grillwork through which the robot had spoken, the newcomers had small beaked m o u t h s. Otherwise, they were identical, even to the very ancient look of their wrinkled, leathery skins.

The robot said, "These are my masters, the Methii."

One of the aliens moved forward slightly. "we come, Earthmen, in response to a message beamed by thought-wave from our warning-post here. We are informed that a space-going race has at last entered Methii domains."

"I get it," Stivens mur-

mured. "The robot's just a sort of cosmic fire-alarm box! Whenever intelligent beings show up, the robot sends out a signal and the emergency patrol comes running!"

"Your analysis is indeed keen," said the Methii spokesman. "On each of the border worlds of our realm we have placed these telepathically-attuned robots whose function it is to warn us of trespassing beings. It makes contact with the trespassers through a simple strategem, extracts telepathically from them their planet of origin and purpose of visit, and sends out an automatic warning to the nearest Methii invasion patrol. Our transportation is by matter-transmission, and is virtually instantaneous over long distances."

"We aren't invaders," O'Dell protested. "We're just explorers who thought this world was uninhabited and not owned by anyone, and—"

"You have entered Methii territory," was the calm, level reply. "By our law this constitutes invasion. We tolerate no alien beings within our domains."

"If you're telepathic as you claim to be," Stivens said, "you can see in our minds that our intention is completely peaceful. In fact, we have orders to depart at once from any world that we find is the property of another species."

"We have no doubt of your peaceful intentions," said the alien. "In any event, there is small chance that three such beings as you could wreak any measurable damage against Methii strength."

"In that case," said Stivens, ignoring the slightly mocking tones of the last Methii statement, "we ask that you remove the force-field that your robot has placed around our spaceship, and permit us to leave this planet and this solar system at once."

"You will be allowed to leave once we are certain that you can never bring harm to Methii civilization," the alien said.

"Which means?"

"It will first be necessary to expunge certain details from your memory. Then—

and only then—will you be permitted to depart," the alien said coldly.

"Galactic isolationists," Walters muttered.

"If you like. We value our privacy. There are over two thousand worlds in the Methii sphere of influence, and we do not wish alien infiltrators to enter any one of these planets."

The aliens moved forward, gliding on their short, stumpy legs with a strange grace. They formed an open circle around the Earthmen.

Walters whispered, "Should we try to make a break for it?"

"Don't waste your time," Stivens advised. "We don't stand a chance against these babies."

"You think we cannot detect your whispers?" asked the Methii spokesman. "The oldest Earthman is correct. You would not be able to move two paces toward your ship if we willed you to remain where you are."

Walters shook his head vehemently. "I don't give a damn," he cried. "I'll call your bluff!"

He broke and started to run. The aliens did not move; no visible action took place. But Walters froze with one leg in mid-air no more than a step or two from his place, and remained that way, looking like a grotesque living statue. Beads of sweat dribbled down his face. The cords of his neck stood out as he fought desperately to put his leg down, without success.

"Resistance is futile," the alien remarked. "We have perfect mental control over you all, Earthmen."

Walters was unable to move a muscle.

"We can destroy you with a minute flick of a mental impulse," said the Methii. "All we need do is interfere with the nerve-channel that controls the beating of your heart, or the intake of your breath—"

Walters' foot lowered itself gently to the ground. The stasis was broken. The young Earthman gasped heavily for breath.

"God, that was awful!" he

exclaimed. "Like being held a prisoner in your own skin! I wanted to get free and couldn't do as much as wiggle a pinky!"

"Very well, Earthmen," the alien said. "We will now enter your minds to complete the process of safeguarding Methii territory. You will not be able to resist."

The four Earthmen went rigid. Only their eyes remained able to move. Tendrils of thought drifted from the aliens to the Earthmen.

It was over in an instant—the entry into the mind, the placing of the unbreakable hypnotic command. The Earth men were allowed finally to relax. The alien said, "It will now be impossible for you to make our existence known to others of your kind. You will return to your home world at once."

THE Methii waited while the four Earthmen crossed the clearing to their ship. The robot had already vanished into the underbrush—on guard and ready in case any other explorers ever decided to venture onto World 9 of System XG.

"The force-field's gone," Buckmaster observed, as they approached the ship.

"Sure," O'Dell said. "They just wanted us to stay around for the treatment. Now we can leave—and they want us out of here in a hurry."

They climbed silently upward into the ship. Walters, the last man in, actuated the control that shut the hatch. O'Dell began setting up for blastoff while Stivens punched out a homeward orbit on the course-computer and Buckmaster got the fuel-feeders operating.

As they worked, Walters said, "What did it feel like to you?"

"Like an ice-pick sliding into my head and sloshing around for a while," O'Dell said.

Stivens chuckled darkly. "It felt like precise surgery to me. They reached in and made a few quick incisions, and got out."

"Felt like a three-day hangover to me," Buckmaster grunted. "Only it lasted a cou-

ple of seconds, that's all. How about you, Walters?"

"It seemed like they were pulling memories out of my mind with wires," Walters said.

"But we *haven't* forgotten, have we?" O'Dell said.

Stivens shook his head. "They didn't say *we'd* forget. Just that we wouldn't be able to communicate the truth to others."

Buckmaster looked doubtful. "Seems to me they can't stop us. All I have to do is open my mouth and say, 'Look here, there's an alien race called the Methii, and they have a robot posted on this plane as a sort of warning, and—' That's how easy it is," Buckmaster finished. "Just let the words come out."

Stivens tightened his lips. "It's easy for us, here in the ship," he said. "But maybe it won't be so easy to talk about it when we're back on Earth, among other people."

"We'll see soon enough," Walters said.

O'Dell called, "Stand by for blastoff, everyone! We're lifting ship!"

TRAVELLING by nullwarp drive, the ship needed only seven weeks to cross the immense gulf of space that separated Earth from the borders of the Methii domains. On the forty-eighth day of the journey the ship snapped out of warp to find Earth square ahead in the viewscreens, and early the following morning they effected a landing at the main Exploratory Force spaceport near the east coast of Australia.

The four men turned their ship over to the spaceport crew and presented themselves, according to regulations, to their section commander, for a review of their voyage. Stivens had with him the routing-chart of assignments. He handed it across the desk.

The section commander picked the booklet up casually. "Good trip?" he asked, routinely.

"Not bad, sir," Stivens said.

"Umm. Glad to hear it." The commander frowned, then peered more closely at the schedule-chart. "According to this you were supposed to

head out through Systems XF, XG, and XH. But I see that you stopped short after World 9 of System XG, with nearly a third of your assignment unfulfilled."

"Yes, sir," Stivens said.

"Well, man, what's your explanation for that? How come you returned early? I notice you gave World 9 a double-plus unfavorable rating, but why didn't you go on to the next planet as scheduled?"

Stivens squirmed uneasily. He stared at his three comrades. His face reddened and he began to perspire heavily.

"Well, sir, I—that is—ah—"

"Yes, Stivens?"

Stivens glanced at O'Dell, Walters, and Buckmaster. "I—can't seem to say it, sir. Maybe one of the other men—"

"O'Dell, can you help Stivens out?" the commander asked.

"Sir, I—we—" O'Dell stopped. He scowled and dug the point of his shoe into the thick carpet. He clenched his fists. "Go on, Buckmaster," he said finally. "You were telling us how easy it would be. Go on!"

The big spaceman took a deep breath and plunged in. "You see, sir, it's this way. When we—"

"Yes, Buckmaster? Go ahead, speak up!"

"When—when—"

"What *is* the matter with you men?" the perplexed commander demanded loudly.

Walters said, "It's a kind of compulsion, sir. We want to speak, but whenever we come to—to a certain topic—we can't talk!"

IT caused a sensation at the Exploratory Force base. Four men had returned from a distant part of the galaxy, and it was obvious that they had encountered something strange, perhaps menacing. But they could not tell anyone what it was.

Question-and-answer games got nowhere. Experts were called in to devise series of yes-and-no questions that might yield information, but every time a direct question that touched on the Methii was asked, such as, "Did you

encounter an intelligent alien race on World 9?" the immediate response was a complete muscle freeze, making impossible either a *yes* or a *no* reply.

Walters was sent off for hypnotic probing. Nothing was learning. O'Dell was given truth drugs, to no avail.

Stivens was subjected to a full-scale depth analysis,, which failed to turn up a thing. They gave Buckmaster a barrage of shock treatments without breaking through his communication barrier.

Finally all four men were called together in the office of the Exploratory Force Commanding Officer, General Bradcliffe. They stood together, O'Dell, Stivens, Buckmaster, and Walters, each knowing what the trouble was, each unable to speak.

General Bradcliffe said, "At ease, men. I've called you here to let you know that we're discontinuing our attempts to crack open your secrets. The psych boys tell us that any more probing is likely to have damaging permanent effects on your minds.

"All we've been able to find out is that you went out to World 9 of System XG and found *something* out there, something that we must know about—something that put an unbreakable lock on your tongues.

"But that's all we know, after months of probing. So we're going to risk sending another exploring team out to that planet. We've *got* to find out what's here, and if we can't get it out of you we'll have to do it some other way."

"Sir, it's no use," O'Dell said. "Any other ships that you send—the same thing will happen. They'll—they'll—"

He stopped. He could go no further.

"This is a risk we must take," the General said. "The men going out there will know the risk they're taking. They'll remain in contact with us, via subspace radio, every step of the way. As for you men, I'm afraid we'll have to pension you off. You're of no use to the Force in the condition you're in now."

So they were pensioned off and given groundside jobs in

Exploratory Force offices. They kept together, the four men, and their eyes bore witness to the secret that they could not voice, even to each other.

And a second ship, manned by eight volunteers, the cream of the Exploratory Force, departed for World 9 of System XG.

O'Dell, Stivens, Buckmaster, and Walters were on hand when the first subspace radio reports came back from the second expedition. The landing was without difficulty; they were establishing a base and preparing to explore the vicinity. On the second day after landing, a new message came from the explorers: "Dudley has heard a cry for help in the forest. We're going out to explore."

Dudley has heard a cry for help in the forest. It was the last message ever received from the second expedition. Their radio went dead immediately afterward, and they were not heard from again until their return to Earth, seven weeks later.

The eight men left the ship and reported to headquarters. They could give no account of their adventures past hearing the cry for help in the forest.

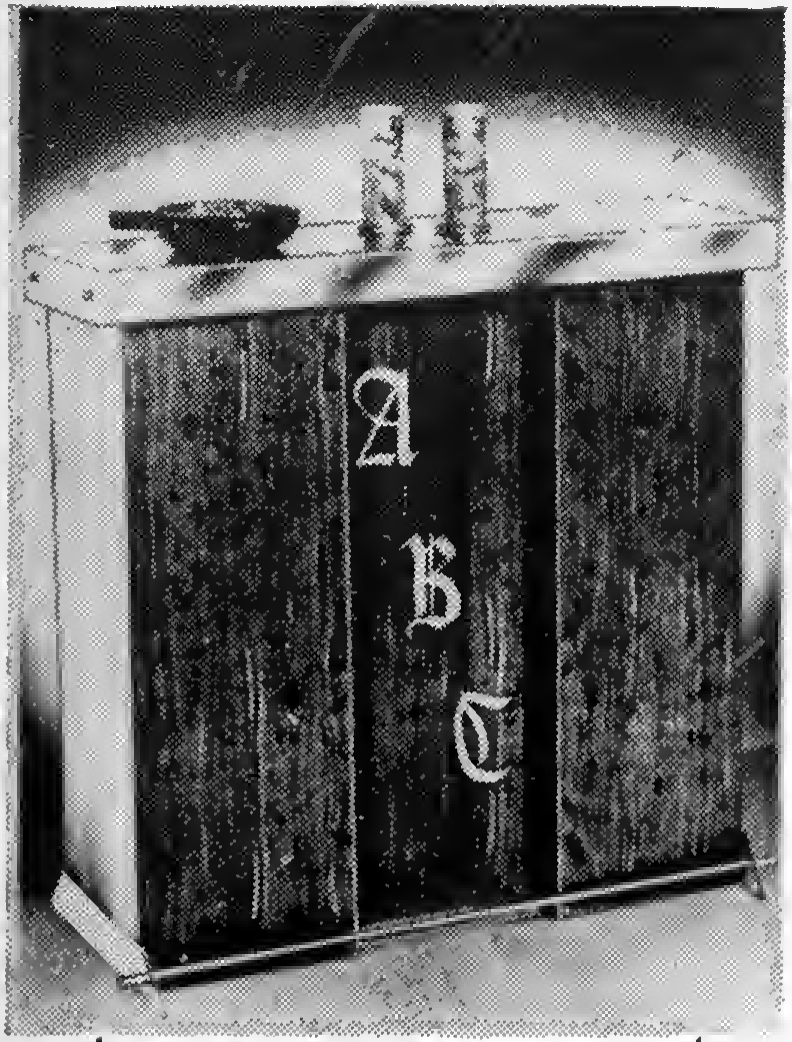
Furious, the Exploratory Force administration announced that a third, and larger, expedition would be outfitted immediately. But twelve men on Earth smiled sadly when they heard the news, knowing that there was no defense against the Methii, and that the only thing to do was to keep far, far away from World 9 of System XG, and to hope that Mankind never again trespassed on Methii territory.

Twelve men. Prisoners in their own skulls, unable to communicate their vital secret.

And it was no surprise to any of them when the third expedition suddenly went silent, on the second day of its stay on World 9 of System XG, after reporting a strange and human-sounding cry in the forest...

THE END

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